

桜庭一樹

Karakura Shunichi

GOSICK

—ゴシック—

角川ビーンズ文庫



Gosick - Volume 01

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let loose the hares!

She ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge.

In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again.

Lewis Carroll, “Alice in Wonderland”

[prologue — let loose the hares!]

A large black object darted past.

A dog, the child thought. A black dog, the color of night, blending into the twilight. A hunting dog. Glossy black fur clothed its limbs, and its two eyes quivered in the darkness, blazing like a blue flame.

The child left the dark woods and walked along a country road. It was far too late to go on his errand. He wished he could go back to his warm home and sit by the fire instead. But as soon as he stepped foot into the garden of this mansion in search of a shortcut, he came across this hunting dog.

The child instinctively drew back several paces.

He heard a soft squishing sound.

An uncomfortable feeling ran up the back of his leg. He had stepped into a clump of softness, with a puddle of warm liquid seeping out of it. When he looked down, he saw soggy chunks of meat scattered around his feet. Red meat, and bits of tawny fur oozing droplets of blood. He spied a long floppy ear extending from a chunk of meat, and hidden underneath, a round eye that looked like a marble. It reflected the darkness of the night sky, and gazed out into inky nothingness.

...It was a hare, he thought.

He lifted his head, and saw a stream of fresh blood dripping from the hound's closed muzzle.

This hound, who had killed and eaten the hare!

The child's hands grew slack, losing their grip on a bottle of wine, which fell slowly to the ground and shattered into pieces. The deep red liquid splashed onto the head of the hunting dog.

Its tongue snaked out of its mouth to lick the fluid away.

The sound of thunder suddenly reverberated in the sky.

A white flash of light illuminated the remote mansion, a decrepit place long since abandoned. But now an unfamiliar figure was sitting on its terrace.

The child opened his eyes wide.

The figure, draped in a red linen cloth, was sitting in a wheelchair. Only a dark cavity was visible through a gap in the red cloth where the head should have been. A wrinkled hand stretched out from inside, as thin as the branch of a withered tree, so insubstantial that it could not have possibly belonged to a living human being.

That hand gripped a golden mirror ever so tightly, and trembled violently.

Three pots of silver, copper, and glass were placed nearby, gleaming eerily in the night.

Then a wizened, husky voice uttered the words, "A youth will soon die...."

The child inhaled sharply at the sound of the old woman's voice. He felt terrified, as if her portentous words were destined to come true.

The voice continued:

"This death shall be the beginning of everything.
The earth will tumble like a falling stone."

The assembled voices of many men came from the terrace that, by all rights, should have been deserted. The child squinted in surprise as the terrace was lit up with the simultaneous clap of thunder, then once more sank into the darkness.

“What shall be done?”

“What will you have us do?”

“Lady Roxane!”

“...A box.” The old woman’s voice rang out again. “Prepare a great box, much greater than the size of this garden. Let it float upon the surface of the sea. And then...”

Several claps of thunder crashed one after the other.

The terrace and garden flickered amidst a white flash.

The child fell numbly to the ground, a scream sticking in his throat at the sight of what was illuminated in that light.

The old woman in red sat upon the terrace, a group of other figures surrounding her. The men, clad in their white cloaks, were stretching out their hands, looking for all like wandering ghosts.

And in the garden...

The garden teemed with stampeding round brownish lumps. At least ten hares were frantically trying to escape, and the hunting dog from earlier was lunging after them, clamping onto them with its jaws. Countless chunks of flesh tumbled onto the ground, staining it in pools of blood.

In the next moment, the thunder and lightning ceased, once again cloaking the mansion and garden in darkness.

All was silent.

At last, the voice of the old woman echoed from the terrace.

“And then ... let loose the hares!”

one

chapter one — the golden fairy

[1]

Ten years later, in a corner of an elegant stone building on the stately campus of Saint Marguerite's School, tucked away in the Alpine foothills of the Kingdom of Sauvure, a small European country....

“...And by the time the coast guard got there, there was still warm food on the dinner plates of the ship, and the stoves were still burning, and card games were still in progress on the tables.... However! There was not a soul on board. All of the passengers and all of the crew members had vanished.... Several rooms showed signs of a bloody struggle, but the ship was completely empty....”

“Uh-huh, uh-huh.”

Two students were chatting enthusiastically in a flower garden behind the U-shaped school building. The small door that led from the building to the courtyard opened out onto a three-tiered stone landing, where the two of them sat on the middle step. As they leaned toward each other, drawn into the conversation, colorful flowers fluttered before their eyes, rocked by a pleasant spring breeze.

One student was a slight, serious-faced young Asian boy, and the other was a European girl with glossy blond hair.

The boy, by the name of Kazuya Kujou, was a foreign student from an island country in the Far East. The girl, Avril Bradley, was a foreign student from England. They hadn't been in the same class for very long, but as fellow foreigners, they had become friends who could chat with each other without restraint.

Avril's eyes had crossed together while in the middle of her animated storytelling, creating a slightly comical effect on her

pretty face. Her short blond hair bounced in the wind. “So anyway,” she continued.

“Yes, yes.”

“I was just at the part when the rescue party came aboard the ship to investigate. When one of them accidentally touched a vase, an arrow came flying at him out of nowhere, and he nearly died....”

“...How did that happen? I guess maybe the vase was booby-trapped. Or maybe someone was hiding, and the moment that other person touched that vase just happened to be when he shot the arrow? Or maybe—”

As a solemn-faced Kazuya started to run down the list of possibilities, Avril’s face turned sulky. When he continued to prattle on, unaware of her change in mood, she slapped the palm of her pale hand against his mouth and stifled his words.

“...Mmph?!”

“Just be quiet and listen. I’m getting to the good part here. My goodness, Kujou. Sometimes you can be so serious that you turn into a complete bore!”

“...Sorry. Go on, Avril.” Kazuya didn’t quite understand what he was apologizing for, but since he was speaking to a girl, he automatically did so anyway.

“Okay? The search party contacted the coast guard, and they tried to search the boat. But the hull was taking on water, and there was no time to do a thorough investigation. So that passenger ship—the Queen Berry—ended up sinking to the bottom of the sea within minutes. With a huge splash of water, and an awful eerie moan, it sank to the depths of the dark, dark sea!”

“That’s not good.”

“Even so...” Avril, undaunted by Kazuya’s avuncular non-response, raised her voice in preparation for the clincher. “But even though the Queen Berry sunk ten years ago, it’s sometimes sighted even now.”

“Surely not. It sank, didn’t it?”

“Shut up. I’ve had enough out of you, Kazuya.”

“...Sorry.”

Avril lowered her voice. “On stormy nights, that ship suddenly appears in the mist, with the people who should’ve died still on board. And they try to tempt the living into becoming sacrifices, so that they too may...”

Kazuya held his breath, waiting for her next words.

Then she suddenly popped her blue eyes open. “...sink with the ship! Aaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaah!”

“Ha, ha, ha! Kujou, I got you! You screamed! Even though you’re a boy! The son of a soldier! You screamed at a ghost story. Ha, ha, ha!” Avril crowed over her victory.

Kazuya could only curse and hang his head, gnashing his teeth over having inadvertently let out a loud scream.

Avril stood up and patted the dust off her bottom. The pleated skirt of her uniform swayed, allowing a glimpse of her long, white legs. The sky was clear, raining down dazzling sunshine onto the stone landing where they sat behind the school. Kazuya squinted against the bright light.

“Time to get back to class, then! Well, well, Kujou; I never expected you would be such a scaredy-cat. You always act like you’re the model son of a military officer, what with those good grades of yours, and that serious expression you always wear on your face. Ha-ha, who’d have thought!” Avril cheerfully gloated, looking down on Kazuya with childish glee. He grew more and more disconsolate.

“I win! Yahoo!”

As Kazuya watched Avril skip inside the building, he made a firm vow in his heart: *Ugh. I swear I’ll find an even scarier story and tell it*

to Avril. I have to make her scream even louder. I'll make her pay for this, or I'm not the third son of an imperial soldier!

Seething with frustration, Kazuya followed Avril back into the building.

Kazuya entered the classroom, which was filled as always with fifteen-year-old children of white, aristocratic families.

Luxuriously-crafted desks of fine oak were arranged in rows, and at each desk sat a boy with gleaming, elegant cufflinks and necktie pins, or a girl with carefully coiffed hair and nails. Their complexions were pale, their limbs long and slim, and their faces uniformly cold and aloof.

Kazuya Kujou, as a particularly serious young boy of Asian descent, made a stark contrast against the rest of them. In fact, the second he reentered the classroom, his classmates looked at him askance and began whispering among themselves.

“It’s the Grim Reaper...”

“He’s back....”

When Kazuya heard them exchanging whispers in their refined French, he fell into an even greater sulk.

It was the year 1924 in the Kingdom of Sauvure, a small European country.

At the border with Switzerland, rolling foothills met smooth plains. Bucolic vineyards sprawled beside the border with France. The border with Italy featured a bustling port that faced the Mediterranean sea. One end of the long and narrow country led to the heart of the Alps, rich in natural beauty, and the other end overlooked the Gulf of Lyon, famous as a playground of the aristocracy. The Kingdom of Sauvure had survived the Great War despite its location surrounded by world powers. Blessed by a mild

climate and bountiful soil, the nation boasted of a long and august history.

If the Gulf of Lyon was this kingdom's majestic entrance, then the Alps, as its most secluded region, could be called its secret room in the attic. At the foot of the mountains stood St. Marguerite's School, which maintained a long history, albeit not quite as long as that of the kingdom itself, as a distinguished institution built to educate the children of the aristocracy. Its reputation rang far and wide across the kingdom, but a closed-door policy prevented the general public from entering the campus. Only students and teachers were allowed to go in or out of the stately stone main building, which would appear in the shape of the letter U if viewed from above, comfortably surrounded by a lush natural environment.

However, after the conclusion of the previous war—which would later be regarded as the first world war that left no nation untouched—St. Marguerite's School began to admit worthy students from allied countries.

Kazuya Kujou, a fifteen-year-old boy from an island country in the Far East, was an honors student and the youngest son of a military family. His two older brothers were far removed from him in age—one was an academic, and the other was actively engaged in a nascent political career. Their status had been taken into account when Kazuya was chosen for the study abroad program.

And so he had come to Sauvure by himself half a year ago. But contrary to the hopes and dreams swelling in his heart, what awaited him was prejudice from the children of aristocrats, and the mysterious ghost stories that circulated throughout the campus.

Kazuya's stony-faced air may have naturally arisen from his serious and conscientious nature, but it had somehow ended up becoming the subject of one of these ghost stories, and he had for that reason suffered many trials over the past half year. ...But we shall leave that story for another occasion.

A bell rang out, signaling the start of the class period. After Kazuya

took his seat along with the rest of the students, his eyes drifted automatically to an empty seat by the window.

For all of the months he had been a student here, he had never seen the occupant of that seat actually attend class. It was always guaranteed to be empty. And yet it seemed as though everyone had come to a mutual decision to never sit in that seat, go near it, or put anything on it. It was as if they were afraid of something.

But Kazuya now knew what it was that they feared.

The homeroom teacher entered the classroom. She was a petite, baby-faced woman with large round glasses and wavy brunette hair, who always clutched her books and reference books to her chest with both hands, and cocked her head to the side like a confused puppy.

That teacher—Miss Cécile—stood at the podium, and sighed.

...*Oh?* Kazuya noticed that Miss Cécile was looking out of sorts.

At that moment, someone sitting behind him threw a balled-up piece of paper at the back of his head. He retrieved it and opened it up, and saw a message written in flowing English: “Dear Scaredy-Cat Kujou: Will you be able to go to the bathroom by yourself tonight? From Avril.”

He turned around and saw Avril waving her hand at him and smiling. She seemed cheerful enough. ...Was this her way of showing affection?

Once the lesson was over, Miss Cécile started toward the exit, but suddenly paused. “Kujou, can you come here for a moment?”

Kazuya rose from his seat and followed the teacher out into the hallway. He fretted to himself, wondering if she was singling him out to tell him that his grades had done the unthinkable and slipped.

“I hoped you would take care of these for me. Here.” She handed him a set of notes from the lesson that they had just covered in class, then pointed back inside the classroom at the seat by the

window that was always empty. “Sorry for always asking you to do this, but could you deliver these to Miss Victorique?”

“I see.... All right.”

As Kazuya nodded, a shadow smoothly popped up beside him. He looked up and saw Avril’s lovely face. Her short blond hair twinkled in the sunlight from the window.

She took a peek at the notes. “Ooh. Miss Cécile, is Victorique that kid who never comes to class?”

“Yes. But that’s not the same as not coming to school at all. Right, Kujou?”

Kazuya nodded cautiously.

Avril tilted her head, her expression inquisitive. “What does that mean? Where else could he be?”

“...The conservatory.”

“Huh? A conservatory? This school has one of those...?”

“Yeah, it does.” Kazuya’s face clouded over. “It’s in a really high place....”

Avril gave him a curious look. “How come? Say, are you friends with this Victorique person?”

Miss Cécile nodded happily when she heard her question, but Kazuya only inclined his head doubtfully.

Avril was becoming increasingly confused. “Well?”

“It’s just that even I don’t really know....”

“Stop being so vague. Then, what kind of boy is he?”

“You could say terrifying... or maybe surly... or cruel....”

Avril gave him a bewildered look, then muttered, “Oh, well,” and skipped back inside the classroom.

“Excuse me, Miss Cécile.” Kazuya stopped the teacher before she left.

“Hmm? What is it?”

“You seemed to be feeling a bit down today. I was just wondering....”

Miss Cécile’s large eyes widened. “Very perceptive of you. Actually... Well, it’s not anything school-related. But a strange incident happened in the village where I’m staying. This morning was rather hectic, what with the policemen going door to door questioning people...”

“An incident?”

Miss Cécile lowered her voice, and a shadow passed over her face, perhaps anxious about the incident occurring so close by. “Well... It’s a very bizarre case. But all I know is what I heard from a policeman, plus the rumors that have been going around the neighborhood.”

“What kind of case is it?”

“This old woman who lived on the outskirts of town was murdered. And in a very strange way, too....”

“An old woman...?”

“I heard that she was retired now, but she used to be a famous fortuneteller. If I remember correctly, her name was Roxane. She would get visited by a lot of politicians and businessmen. They said she had the ability to see the future.”

“Miss Cécile, fortunetelling is nothing but...” ...superstition, Kazuya wanted to say, but seeing how tired she looked, he decided against it.

“They say the killer still hasn’t been caught. So it’s scary. Anyway, it was a strange way to kill someone. How could someone do

something like that....”

Miss Cécile went on to tell Kazuya some of what she had heard from the policemen and the rumors floating around her neighborhood. Taking together the parts that the stories had in common, it sounded as if that fortuneteller had been shot to death inside a locked room. But the weapon was nowhere to be found, and the killer was also unknown.

“I’m scared, but I guess we just have to be patient a little longer. Because that inspector Gréville de Blois, who’s been getting famous lately, made such a big fuss about conducting the investigation. He took along two deputies and he’s searching the whole village.”

“That’s a bad sign....” Kazuya murmured under his breath.

Miss Cécile gave him a puzzled look. “And that old woman who was murdered seems off, too. Her mansion was overrun with hares, and apparently she used to have dogs hunt them down and kill them. Poor things... That must’ve been scary for them....” she murmured, a dark look in her eyes.

She seemed fearful of the gloomy, sinister atmosphere surrounding this case. But when she caught sight of Kazuya’s worried expression, the smile quickly returned to her face, and she pointed at the papers in his hands. “Well, Kujou. I’ll leave these to you. Although... It is a little high.... So, good luck with that climb.”

“Yes, ma’am... I’m used to it.” Kazuya nodded, and chuckled dryly.

two

[2]

St. Marguerite's Library, as one of Europe's most renowned depositories of books, stood hidden in a corner of the campus. Three hundred years of history were etched into the substantially built structure, its stone façade impressive enough to make it a natural tourist attraction. But the official school policy of barring access to unauthorized individuals kept the library unsullied by the eyes of the public.

Kazuya's shoes made a crunching sound as he walked on the dry ground toward the library. Once he reached the end of the path, he went inside.

Bookshelves lined every wall of the square, hollow library. An atrium occupied the center of the tower, and a sublime religious fresco gleamed on the distant ceiling. And winding precariously from bookshelf to bookshelf was a narrow wooden staircase, shaped like an enormous labyrinth.

When Kazuya lifted his eyes to the top floor, an unbidden sigh escaped his throat. He had seen something dangling near the ceiling that resembled a long golden belt.

“Victorique... Once again, you're at the very top....”

Kazuya had no choice but to start climbing the maze of stairs. Throughout his ascent, he absentmindedly spoke his thoughts aloud. “It would be nice if she could come down a little lower once in a while. But I guess she climbs these stairs every day. That's too much trouble....”

As he climbed the stairs, the floor below faded into the distance. Looking down would make him feel dizzy, so Kazuya made sure to look straight ahead, taking each step with a steady pace and his head held high, like the third son of an imperial soldier that he was.

His breath grew ragged along the way, but he kept on climbing.

“But still... Why did they have to build the library this way in the first place....”

Some said that this library had been constructed in the early seventeenth century by the king who founded St. Marguerite's School. The king, who was constantly henpecked by his wife, had a secret room built on the very top floor so that he could indulge himself in trysts with a lover, and for this reason had the staircase built in the form of a maze.

In modern times, a hydraulic elevator had been installed as part of renovations, but it was limited to the use of staff, and not accessible to Kazuya.

So he climbed.

He climbed and climbed the labyrinthine staircase.

...And still climbed ever higher.

At last, he reached the very top floor, and halfheartedly called out, “Victorique...? Are you here...?”

There was no response. Kazuya continued, undiscouraged. “I know you're here. I already saw your long hair. Hey!” He directed his voice toward the owner of the blond hair that hung down into the open space of the atrium like a belt.

A thin, white strand of smoke rose up to the ceiling.

Kazuya took a step forward.

There he found...

...a garden.

The secret room at the very top of the library was no longer a bedroom for the king and his lover, but had since been reconstructed as a lush greenhouse. Tropical trees and ferns abounded, and soft rays of sunlight shone brightly through

skylights.

It was a brightly-lit, and yet empty, conservatory.

But someone had left a large porcelain doll sprawled out on the landing that led to the entrance of the greenhouse.

The doll's height was close to life-size at around one hundred and forty centimeters tall. Its body was enveloped in luxurious clothing, lavishly bedecked in silk and lace. Splendidly long blond hair draped down to the floor like a turban come undone. Its face bore the detached coldness of porcelain. Pale, nearly transparent emerald-green eyes, ambiguous in whether they belonged to an adult or a child, glimmered with alertness.

This porcelain doll was puffing away at a pipe held in its mouth. A white wisp of smoke drifted up toward the ceiling.

Kazuya walked straight toward that porcelain doll—no, that girl, who was beautiful enough to be a doll.

“...You could at least answer me back, Victorique.”

The girl's green eyes were rapidly shifting between the books lined up on the floor. The books, which radiated around her in all directions, included books of ancient history, the latest scientific discoveries, mechanics, witchcraft, alchemy.... They were also written in various languages, from English and French, to Latin and Chinese.

The girl casually skimming these books—Victorique—suddenly came back to her surroundings, and looked up. Faced with Kazuya's look of displeasure, she spoke only briefly. “Oh, it's you.” Her voice was low and husky, like that of an old woman. It was a voice far removed from the appearance of her small body and fairy-like beauty.

Kazuya felt miffed by her intolerably aloof attitude, a mark of her aristocratic background. But she was always like this. Every time he came to visit, Victorique would end up irritating him in some way.

Victorique fell silent, and once again turned her gaze back to her

books. She read rapidly while flipping through pages, then spoke again. "What do you want from me, reaper?"

"I thought I told you not to call me that." Kazuya hung his head, and leaned against the railing of the staircase.

"Reaper" happened to be Kazuya's nickname, of which he wasn't particularly fond. Its origin lay in the collective mania for ghost stories that had infected the student body. As a school with a long history, there was no lack of material for such tales. There was the so-called "traveler who comes in spring brings death to the school", "a demon dwells in the thirteenth step of the staircase", and so on....

With his dark hair and jet-black eyes, the taciturn traveler from the Orient, Kazuya Kujou, wound up becoming universally known as the "reaper who comes in spring". The students who so adored their ghost stories wouldn't dare go near him. He had his doubts as to how much they really believed in these stories, but the students clearly enjoyed them, as if the entire school had decided to engage in a single hobby en masse.

For this reason, Kazuya was unable to make close friends. And so Miss Cécile had arranged for him to end up in the position of liaison, or perhaps attendant, to the school's resident misfit, Victorique.

It wasn't that he really wanted to spend time with this arrogant beauty... or so he told himself. But before he knew it, he had fallen into the habit of climbing that labyrinthine staircase to meet her on a regular basis.

Victorique paid no mind to Kazuya as he brooded over his lot in life, and continued in her husky voice. "Kujou, I suppose you've come to see me once again because you're still unable to make any friends. You just don't learn, do you. Or is it that you simply enjoy climbing the stairs?"

"...Of course not. Here, take these." Kazuya thrust the papers that the teacher had given him at Victorique.

She jutted out her chin at the floor as if to say, “Put them over there.” Then she said in a sing-song voice, “So, the weather was so nice that you decided to have a date in the garden?”

“No, it wasn’t a date, we were just chatting. She was telling me a story about this haunted unmanned luxury liner, the ‘Queen Berry,’ and—wait a second, Victorique.” Kazuya was in the process of promptly leaving the conservatory, but he rushed back inside, and peered at Victorique, who was burying her face in her books. “How did you know I was there? Did you see me?”

“No.”

“Then how did you know?”

“The way I always know things, Kujou.” Victorique spoke wearily, without lifting her head from her books. “An overflowing wellspring of wisdom told it to me.” Ignoring Kazuya who was waiting impatiently for her next words, she puffed on her pipe and went on nonchalantly in her sing-song tone. “Kujou, you are a methodical and damnably serious bookworm.”

“...Well, pardon me for that.”

“A person like you would scrupulously wear your hat when going out of doors in uniform. And so I see the marks on your hair of having worn your hat firmly about your head. And then there’s the pink flower petal stuck to your collar. That belongs to one of the pansies blooming in the gardens. Therefore, I may conclude that you were in the garden.”

“But as far as being a date goes... For all you know, I could’ve been by myself....”

“Kujou, you’re in high spirits this morning. I heard your enthusiastic footsteps while you were climbing the staircase.”

“Huh...?” *Is that so?* wondered Kazuya to himself. He thought he had climbed it the same way he always did.... With even footsteps, and his head held up high....

Victorique coldly spit out her next words. “Your responses to my

utterances have also been unusually cheerful. It goes without saying that there can be only one reason for such exuberant behavior by the male of the species—that is, lust. Kujou, you were carried away by your unseemly lust and became excessively excited. But there would be no reason to feel lustful in the garden all by yourself. This implies that you were there with a woman. And it must be a woman that you are fond of. This is what the wellspring of wisdom has said to me.”

“No, Victorique... Please choose your words more carefully. I mean, ‘lust’... and the ‘unseemly’ and all that is really unnecessary, too....” Kazuya’s face turned bright red, and he sat down, hugging his knees. It wasn’t the first time that Victorique had deduced his behavior sight unseen, but today’s instance was particularly embarrassing. He stared resentfully at her profile. “You guessed it, huh.... I’ve got to hand it to you....”

At first, Victorique gave no response, and merely went on reading her books. But after a delay, Kazuya’s words finally seemed to reach her brain, and she nodded. “Yes. I have honed my senses so that I may take in the fragments of chaos in this world, and allow my ‘wellspring of wisdom’ to toy with them, and in this way, relieve my boredom. In other words, I reconstruct them. And when I feel like it, I may even articulate the process so that even a mediocre individual like yourself may understand. Well, generally that’s too much trouble, so usually I’d rather just stay silent.”

“...Then why don’t you stay silent in front of me?”

“I suppose that’s because the mere sight of you makes me want to tease you.” With this, Victorique said no more, and only plunged her face deeper and deeper into her books.

Kazuya gazed at Victorique’s profile, his shoulders slumping.

Kazuya Kujou, as a student bright enough to be sent abroad as a representative for his country, would normally never allow himself to be called a “mediocre individual”. But when it came to Victorique, this strange noble-born girl who had never shown up for class even once, for some reason he couldn’t find it in himself to come up with a retort.

In fact, Kazuya didn't know much at all about Victorique's upbringing or what sort of girl she was.

This girl was absolutely beautiful, absolutely tiny, absolutely intelligent, and completely unapproachable. She had been given a boy's name for some reason, and was slightly mad, but she may very well have been a genius. According to several informed sources, he had heard that she was an illegitimate daughter from an aristocratic family; that her relatives inexplicably feared her and hadn't wanted to leave her in their mansion, and so had sent her to this school; that her mother was a famous dancer, and was insane; that she was the incarnation of a legendary grey wolf, and had been seen devouring raw meat.... True to the reputation of a school riddled with ghost stories, the rumors about her had gotten steadily more dubious.

Kazuya had never asked Victorique about these things. As the son of an imperial soldier, it would be unacceptable for him to look at a person with such base curiosity. Furthermore, Victorique herself was such a bizarre person that he had no idea where to begin with his questions.

And so, despite knowing nothing about her, he continued to go through the trouble of climbing the stairs to this conservatory, where he would get angry with Victorique and her sharp tongue. This was Kazuya's ... well, how shall we put it ... daily life for now.

"Anyway, Victorique. You sure read a lot of books every day," said Kazuya, still undeterred.

Victorique gave no response other than a slight nod.

"Do you intend to read every book in this library?"

He had meant it in jest, but Victorique lifted her head, and casually pointed below the railing of the staircase. "I've just about finished reading everything on this wall. ...Oh? Kujou, your eyeballs look as if they're going to pop out of your head. What's the matter?"

“No... I was just surprised. What are you reading right now?”

“Lots of things.” Victorique yawned, then stretched like a cat, arching her back in the shape of a bow. “Oh, I’m so bored. There isn’t enough chaos to reconstruct. No matter how much I read, it still isn’t enough, Kujou.”

“...I think normally someone’s head would burst from just reading one of these,” Kazuya said, pointing at the book in Latin that lay opened in front of her.

Victorique had been opening her mouth wide in one yawn after another, but now her expression suddenly brightened. “I know, Kujou. Let me explain something to you.”

“Explain what?”

“About this book. You know, this book ... this one is about ancient methods of fortune-telling.”

“Fortune-telling? Not interested.”

“Makes no difference to me.”

“Huh... Why tell me, then?”

“Because I’m bored,” Victorique said with a nod, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Then she launched into a monologue, forcing Kazuya to stay put and listen just as he was about to escape out of disinterest.

“According to this book, fortune-telling has gone hand in hand with human desires ever since ancient times. For example, in the ancient Roman empire, people would burn animal intestines and scapulae, then divine omens in the cracks that formed. This seems to have persisted up until the eleventh century, but one of the Christian ecumenical councils put a stop to it. And then there’s book divination, which is opening books and divining based on whatever is written on that particular page, which is another method that persisted from ancient times. The ancients would use the books of Homer, but the Christians began using the Bible. But the Church once again put a stop to it. ...Hey, don’t fall asleep, Kujou. I’m

dying of boredom here.”

“...Yes, sorry.”

“Therefore, fortune-telling became a heresy. But even though governments and the church prohibited it, people still continued to do it. Over the centuries, there were even many cases of clergymen secretly performing it in churches. Do you know why that is?”

“Well...”

Victorique removed the pipe from her mouth and exhaled a mouthful of smoke. Then she wearily declared, “Because it worked.”

“...Surely not.”

“The ancient Roman emperor Valens felt insecure over his own position, so he called a fortune teller to divine the name of the person who was threatening him. That is, he wrote out the alphabet on a level surface using animal feed, then released chickens to eat it. The outcome was that the chickens ate the feed on the letters that read, ‘T’, ‘H’, ‘E’, ‘O’, ‘D’. The emperor interpreted that as a reference to the name ‘Theodorus’, and had everyone in the empire bearing that name put to death. However, the name of the next person who would go on to rule the empire happened to be Theodosius. That means he had the wrong person.”

“...That’s a disturbing story.”

“Listen to me seriously. I’m about to fall asleep out of boredom.”

“Sorry.”

“Various reports attest that the most reliable method of divination uses an object known as the ‘magic mirror’. This mirror, also depicted in Leonardo Da Vinci’s painting ‘Witch Using a Magic Mirror’, is the predecessor to the crystal ball. One prepares a silver jar filled with wine, a copper one filled with oil, and a glass one filled with water, then performs the divination for three days and three nights. The copper jar represents the past, the glass jar the present, and the silver jar the future, and these are then reflected in

the magic mirror.”

Victorique swiftly opened a book to a page with a diagram of a woman clad head to toe in a red cloth, holding a golden mirror, and with three jars in front of her. White-cloaked men bowed before her with their foreheads to the ground.

Victorique turned the page, all while continuing to speak without pause.

Kazuya listened to her quietly, afraid of provoking her. He remembered how in the country where he had been born and raised, women would obediently walk three paces behind men. Kazuya himself still couldn't quite get used to dealing with the type of girl who would walk three paces ahead of him, and turn around yelling, “Hurry up!”

Everything was for the sake of his studies, he thought to himself. The pursuit of knowledge was a difficult thing. And he was getting sleepy.

“And then, the description of staff divination used by the prophet Moses, as depicted in the Book of Numbers, is also very interesting. In order to find out which tribe the leader of the Israelites would come from, they prepared twelve staffs with the names of each tribe written on them, and divined from those.”

“...Huh. Anyway, I'm pretty surprised.”

“About what?”

“I didn't think you would believe in fortune-telling.”

“I never said I believed in it.”

“Oh?”

Victorique pulled out yet another book from the mountain of opened books radiating around her. She opened it up and showed it to Kazuya, but he immediately shrunk away from it when he saw that it was written in difficult-looking German. Victorique reached out her small hands and shoved the book at him.

Kazuya gave up on trying to run away. "...What's that book?"

"It's on psychology. Now I suppose I owe a block-headed, half-witted savant like you an explanation. 'Why do people believe in fortune-telling?'"

"Huh..."

"Because it works. Not in the objective sense, of course. It works in the subjective sense. That means one feels as if it works. That is the innate power of the superstition known as fortune-telling, and that is why it's persisted ever since the premodern era. That means it's supported by the psychology of the masses of people who *want* it to work. ...In other words, the craze for ghost stories that infests this school follows the same principle. Everyone is an unconscious accomplice, operating in tandem."

"Yeah..."

"And so, this points to three possible causes for correct instances of divination. The first one is that only the occasions where it has worked are the ones left in the historical record. The countless times that it was off are left sleeping in the shadow of the times that it was accurate. The second one is that it works depending on the skill of the fortune-teller to guess the wishes of the supplicant by reading his facial expressions. And the third one is when any answer may do."

"Mmm..."

"For example, Kujou, let's say that before you came to study in this country, you had your fortune read to predict what sort of life you would lead as a foreign student. If it came out favorable, then if you ended up doing well in school after you arrived here, you would think it was accurate. If it came out unfavorable, then whenever something unpleasant happened, you would still think it was accurate."

"Uh-huh..."

"...This is what happened with the emperor Valens, whom I

mentioned previously. The five letters that the chickens chose could have been combined into any number of combinations. But the emperor personally suspected a young man by the name of Theodorus, and that's why he combined the resulting letters into that name. This meant that fortune-telling was simply a superstition that he used to support his preexisting psychological state, a shove on the back to push him into something that he had already set his heart on doing. It was nothing more than a mere device in order to duck responsibility for his—argh!”

“Wh-wh-what happened?!”

Victorique, who until now had been engaged in a lively monologue, had suddenly plunged her small, golden-haired head into her hands and groaned. Kazuya jumped up, concerned that she had finally gone completely mad.

But she only glared at him balefully. “Explaining this to a mediocre person like you only made me even more bored!”

“...Th-that’s a rude thing to say.”

“Ugh, my chest hurts. This boredom is getting painful. ...Now, how will you take responsibility for this?”

“Excuse me?!” Kazuya burst into indignation, but then suddenly remembered something. “That reminds me. Say, Victorique. Speaking of fortune-telling...”

He thought of the case that Miss Cécile had mentioned to him, about an old woman in the neighboring village who had been murdered in a unusual way, having been shot to death in a locked room, and the police being unable to locate the murder weapon. The victim was a woman named Roxane, and her profession was...

“A fortune-teller was murdered yesterday in the village nearby.”

The moment he mentioned this, Victorique’s thin shoulders twitched. She lifted her face, and for the first time that morning, stared directly at Kazuya.

The fine strands of her hair gleamed golden, painting a pale wave

as they spilled down to the floor. Her skin was so white that her blood vessels were visible. And her two emerald-green eyes, which had been focused on some distant, unknown landscape, turned to him, their gaze melancholy, like that of an old woman who had lived for far too long.

Kazuya unconsciously drew back from her stare.

And then Victorique quietly parted her lips, and whispered, “So this is chaos.” Then she blew a mouthful of smoke into Kazuya’s face.

“Well, I don’t know all the details yet....” Kazuya sat down beside Victorique, coughing violently at the smoke, wiping tears from his eyes. “I just heard a little bit about it when I was chatting with Miss Cécile earlier. And all she knew was what she had heard from a policeman, and from the rumors going around the neighborhood. ... Well, anyway, it sounds like that old woman bought a small, cozy manor to live in around the time when the Great War began....”

The fortune-teller Roxane was a wrinkled old woman, rumored to be around the age of eighty or ninety, and lived in her mansion with an Indian butler and an Arab maid. The incident had apparently occurred the previous evening, when her granddaughter had come to visit.

“...Hold on, Kujou. Why was her butler an Indian and her maid an Arab?”

“They said that she liked to have exotic servants. And that she was very learned, and knew Hindi and Arabic at a conversational level, so she didn’t have any problems communicating with them. Oh, and the maid can only speak Arabic, but the butler seems to be fluent in English and French, too.”

Roxane had been shot to death in her own room that night. The bullet had pierced her left eye, and she died instantly. The culprit was unknown. It appeared to be either her butler, maid, or granddaughter, who were the only other ones present in the mansion that night, but the investigation was at an impasse.

“Why is that?”

“Well... The door and the window were locked from the inside, and they couldn’t even find the pistol that shot her. The three of them seem to be denying they had anything to do with it.”

“Hmm...” Victorique looked up at him, as if trying to goad him forward.

Kazuya squirmed nervously under her gaze. He had reached the limit of the information that he had stored from his chat with Miss Cécile. And even Miss Cécile herself wouldn’t know anything more than that. He would find himself in a bind if Victorique were to press him for more.

Just as that thought had crossed his mind, he heard the footsteps of someone entering the library. He looked over the railing, and saw Inspector Gréville de Blois, the one that Miss Cécile had earlier referred to as a famous detective, rush inside.

Not again... An expression of disgust on his face, Kazuya nudged Victorique’s shoulder. “I’ll leave the rest of the story to that fellow with the weird hairstyle.”

“...Mmm?” Victorique’s face grew almost imperceptibly darker.

They heard the sound of Inspector de Blois boarding the hydraulic staff elevator.

The iron cage rose with a coarse clang.

Next, Kazuya saw the inspector’s deputies, two young men who wore rabbit-skin hunting caps, skip inside the library, amiably holding hands. Apparently, they would be waiting below on standby. They looked up and cheerfully waved their unoccupied hands at him.

Gréville de Blois, a young aristocrat with an interest in crime, had forced his way into the position of inspector at the local police station. The two long-suffering deputies were thoroughly used to the inspector taking advantage of them to conduct investigations at his whim.

Kazuya glanced away from the two men waiting below, and heard a

loud clunk as the elevator arrived at the top floor. Inspector de Blois emerged into a small alcove on the side of the conservatory.

Across the lush greenery, and beneath the mellow sunlight shining in from the skylights, stood a man of peculiar appearance. He wore a three-piece suit and a garish ascot tie. Expensive silver cufflinks glittered at his wrists. He was the prototypical fashionable young nobleman, and yet there was one thing amiss.

It was his hair. His thick blond hair was inexplicably swept forward and tapered into a hard point. Depending on how he used it, it was enough to turn his head into a weapon.

He struck a pose, leaning against the doorframe with his arms folded, and called out, “Hey, Kujou!”

“...Hello.”

Inspector de Blois approached Kazuya in a jaunty manner and affably greeted him, and only him. He didn’t bother to look at Victorique at all. She, for her part, faced another direction and continued smoking away on her pipe.

“It’s a good thing that I was able to save your life thanks to this exceptional intellect of mine. My, that certainly was a difficult case! I remember it like yesterday....”

“Even though Victorique was the one who solved it....”

“So, I thought I would tell you about another case. Somehow, whenever I talk to you, my mind suddenly gets sharper. That’s the brain of a famous inspector for you!”

Kazuya had once been eyewitness to a murder case that had taken place on the road to school, and was arrested by Inspector de Blois. He had agonized over the possibility of being deported back to his home country, or being tried for murder, but instead he was saved by Victorique, an eccentric beauty whom he had met in this conservatory.

Needless to say, Victorique had not rescued Kazuya out of any particular sense of concern for his well-being. She used something

that she called her “wellspring of wisdom” to interpret the fragments of chaos that required reconstruction, and so arrive at the truth. In fact, even after she solved the case, Victorique made no attempt to help prove Kazuya’s innocence. He had been forced instead to explain Victorique’s reasoning to the inspector himself and plead on his own behalf.

Remembering that case caused Kazuya to break out into a cold sweat even now.

But after having tasted victory, ever since then Inspector de Blois would show up to the conservatory every time he encountered a new case, and would end up relating the specifics to Kazuya. Then Victorique, listening alongside him, would “reconstruct the fragments of chaos”, thus allowing the inspector to return to the outside world and solve the case.

In other words, he was far from the accomplished inspector that he proclaimed himself to be. He was more akin to someone relying on a cheat sheet in human form....

“Inspector, please ask Victorique. I won’t be able to help you no matter how much you tell me.”

“I didn’t quite catch your meaning. There’s no one else here but you and me.”

Kazuya silently eyed the two people before him in exasperation.

Apparently, Victorique and Inspector de Blois had known each other since before the first case with Kazuya. But the two of them categorically refused to acknowledge each others’ presence, and the inspector seemed to deeply resent having to ask Victorique for her help. Kazuya thought the inspector could have chosen not to rely on Victorique if he disliked her so much, but this was nevertheless the state of affairs in which they found themselves.

Victorique abruptly looked up, and turned to Kazuya. “It’s all right, Kujou. I’ll just be here reading my books. You two can go on talking. I may mumble a bit to myself from time to time, but you needn’t mind me. Even if I happen to drop some hints now and

then, just pretend I'm not here.”

“No, but really...”

“OK, I'll begin. Now, then—hey, look at me!” Inspector de Blois enthusiastically rolled up his sleeves.

Kazuya resigned himself to listening.

Inspector de Blois took a pipe from his bag, and with a single smooth, showy movement, placed it into his mouth. Kazuya absentmindedly watched white smoke rise from the pipe, disappearing into the inspector's upswept hair.

Victorique sat facing away from them as usual, smoking her own pipe.

The inspector exhaled a mouthful of smoke, then began to speak. “This fortune-teller, Roxane, was killed last night. After the others staying at her home finished their dinner, they each retired to their rooms. She went to rest in her own room on the first floor. Her butler was outside standing below her window at the time, and claims that he was taking the hares that had been released into the garden back into their hutches.”

“...Hares?” asked Victorique.

The inspector shuddered at her sudden question, then he nodded at Kujou. “This fortune-teller owned a lot of hares, and one hunting dog. She would sometimes release the hares and let the dog hunt them down. We're not sure why, but she had them separated into different groups of hares for hunting, and hares that were allowed to live out their lives, but we don't know the reason behind it. She seems to have been an eccentric old woman.”

“I see,” Victorique interjected again, as if participating in the conversation. But she still didn't bother to look at the face of the person to whom she was speaking, and Kazuya was still stuck in between. ...But then it was always this way.

“The maid was cleaning the room next door. The granddaughter was in a room right on top of them, dancing and playing a record with the volume up. Then came the sound of a gunshot, and everyone was startled and went to gather in the hallway. The maid was concerned for the fortune-teller, and knocked on her door and called out to her in a loud voice, but there was no response. The door was locked. The butler panicked, and suggested that he bring an axe to break it down. The door was made of a thin and light material so that the wheelchair-bound old woman could easily open and close it, and the butler thought he could easily break it open with one swing. But at this point, the granddaughter screamed, and strongly demurred to this plan. Her shameful reasoning was that if the old woman was dead, then the house would be hers, so she refused to allow him to damage it.

“The butler stood down, but the maid, who was a foreigner, didn’t understand what the granddaughter was saying, and she grabbed a pistol that the old woman kept for self-defense in the next room, and shot at the keyhole of the door before anyone could stop her. This enraged the granddaughter, and she attacked the maid, and the two of them exchanged blows. Meanwhile, the Indian butler entered the room by himself. Then he said he saw ... the fortune-teller, unconscious, about to fall from the wheelchair that she always sat in. She had been shot through her left eye, and had died instantly. But the window was locked from the inside, and no one could locate the murder weapon.”

“Hmm.”

“I haven’t the foggiest idea how to explain any of it....” murmured the inspector.

Victorique opened her mouth wide in a yawn of sincere boredom, extended out both of her thin arms like the stretch of a sluggish cat, and said, “Oh, so that’s how it is.” And then she yawned again.

Inspector de Blois glared at Victorique’s profile with a startlingly visceral hostility, then turned his eyes away. “Well, I know who the killer is. There’s certainly something suspicious about the butler standing below the window. But I have no proof....”

“...The maid is the killer, Gréville.” Victorique’s voice came out slightly muffled in mid-yawn.

The inspector stiffened, and shot her a look of surprise. Then he hastily averted his eyes from her, and faced Kazuya. “Well, now, Kujou. I believe you owe me an explanation!”

“How should I know?! And throttling my neck like that will do you no good, either!”

Now Victorique uttered in a soft voice, “You said that the maid can only speak Arabic, and the fortune-teller was the only one who could understand her.”

“Huh...?” Kazuya and the inspector, still in their fighting stances, turned to look at Victorique. “What do you mean, Victorique?”

“It’s very simple. It doesn’t even rise to the level of chaos. Now listen carefully. The maid knocked on the door, and shouted something in Arabic. When there was no response, she went to the next room to retrieve a pistol, then returned to the hallway. She shot the lock off the door, and broke it.”

“Right.”

“The only ones who understood what the maid shouted were the maid herself, and the fortune-teller.”

Kazuya leaned toward Victorique to listen to her quiet voice. “What did she shout?”

“She probably said the following, although I don’t know which person she wanted to implicate as the enemy, the granddaughter or the butler. ‘Madame, your life is in danger. Did you hear that gunshot? Move away from the window, and come closer to the door. I’ll come help you.’”

Kazuya and the inspector exchanged a look.

“What? Why? Ugh...” The inspector buried his head in his hands in confusion.

Kazuya asked on his behalf, “So ... at the time, the fortune-teller was still ... alive, then?”

“Of course.” Victorique nodded calmly. She was about to bury her head back into her books again when a thought seemed to suddenly cross her mind, causing her to look up.

Kazuya and the inspector stared at her silently, their heads cocked in bemusement. Sunlight flowed in from the skylights, illuminating the tops of their heads. A gentle breeze rustled the tree branches in the overgrown greenhouse and the hair of Inspector de Blois.

After a few moments of silence, Victorique yawned widely. Realizing that no one had understood what she had said, she asked in a tone of extreme vexation, “My method of articulation isn’t enough for you, is it?”

“Not at all. Please, Victorique.”

“Basically, then. What killed the fortune-teller wasn’t the first gunshot. That was just a decoy. The maid brazenly shot her to death in front of the eyewitnesses, who had rushed to the door to see what was the matter. She shouted in Arabic to fool the fortune-teller into believing that it was safe, and convince her to go in front of the door. So when the maid shot the lock, she hit the fortune-teller along with it. The reason she was shot through the left eye was likely because she was trying to peek outside. But what she saw on the other end was only the muzzle of a gun.”

“Hold on... Then who shot the gun the first time, Kujou?”

“Inspector, I’m not the one solving the case; Victorique is.”

“The first shot...” Victorique again opened her mouth in a wide yawn. “...came from the neighboring room. The object was to frighten the fortune-teller, and summon the rest of the people in the mansion. Now, I still don’t know where she was trying to shoot. You can inspect that room later. You should discover a fresh bullet hole there.”

“...I see.” Inspector de Blois stood up. He smoothed out his three-

piece suit and ran his hand over his pointed head like nothing had happened, then made a quick dash toward the elevator, almost as if he were trying to escape.

Behind him, Kazuya called out in righteous indignation.
“Inspector!”

“...What?”

“You ought to thank Victorique. She helped you with your investigation, after all.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” The inspector turned around, his face brimming with haughtiness. He stiffened his shoulders, rose his chin into the air, and glared at Kazuya. Then he slowly removed the pipe from his mouth, and blew smoke into Kazuya’s face.

Kazuya coughed violently.

The inspector babbled on nervously as he made a hasty exit.
“Kujou, you know, I merely came here to check up on the Oriental boy whom I rescued out of concern for his well-being. I’m glad to see you hale and hearty, but you’re baffling me with this bizarre line of questioning....”

“...Gréville.” Victorique looked up and addressed him in a soft voice.

Inspector de Blois, who had already entered the iron cage of the elevator, turned to look at her with a pensive expression. He stared at her small form as if he were gazing upon something huge and terrifying. In that instant, adult and child seemed to switch places with an almost palpable ringing sound.... It was a peculiar sight.

Kazuya watched them silently.

“The mystery of the culprit’s motive is hidden in what exactly she shot with the first bullet.”

“...What do you mean?!”

“Figure out the rest yourself, Gréville.”

The elevator began to move with a harsh clang.

Inspector de Blois' handsome face twisted in chagrin, then disappeared beneath the floor as the iron cage descended.

Victorique yawned loudly. Then she flopped onto the floor in the manner of a cat, and rolled around in a tantrum. “It ended in mere moments. Now I'm bored again. Oh, ohh....” she moaned.

“Say, Victorique,” Kazuya said darkly, the very picture of deep disapproval.

Naturally, Victorique paid no attention to Kazuya's tone. She continued to roll around on top of the opened books.

“That inspector with the weird hairstyle plans to claim your deductions as his own again. Even though the truth is that you're the one who always gives him the answers.”

“...Does it bother you?” asked Victorique abruptly.

Kazuya nodded vehemently. “I can't stand such unseemly behavior. Besides, isn't his attitude rather ungrateful for someone asking a favor?”

Victorique listlessly rolled around and around.

Kazuya added suddenly, “That reminds me.... Say, did you already know the inspector from somewhere? The two of you seem to be on ... awfully bad terms with each other....”

Victorique did not respond.

Kazuya shrugged, and gave up on asking anything more.

Then Victorique suddenly rose upright. “Kujou, why don't you give me a little dance?”

“...What?!”

“Don’t dawdle; get up and dance for me right now.”

“May I ask why?!”

Victorique answered with a nod, as if her request were a most eminently reasonable one. “To relieve my boredom.”

“...Well, I’m not going to. I’m leaving! Looks like afternoon classes will be starting soon, so....”

“Kujou.” Victorique gazed at him unwaveringly with her green eyes.

Kazuya found himself unable to move, feeling much like a frog caught in the sights of a snake. Victorique blew out a puff of smoke, causing him to burst into a fit of coughing yet again. “Come on, Victorique.”

“Kujou, hurry up...” Victorique pinned him with an unyielding stare. “...and dance.”

“....Yes, ma’am.”

Kazuya groped the distant reaches of his memory, and began to perform a dance from the summer festival of his hometown. As the son of a military family, he had never before allowed himself to indulge in such frivolous pastimes as dancing or singing.

“...Hmm. What do you call this sort of dance?”

“It’s a [Bon festival](#) dance. Do you want to try?”

“Of course not. Oh... I’m so bored.”

“You really are a cruel person, aren’t you.”

“I think I’ll take a nap....” Victorique’s sighs echoed throughout the conservatory.

three

[3]

And then, the next morning...

In his room in the boys' dormitory at St. Marguerite's School, Kazuya rose at his usual seven-thirty sharp. He walked through the hallway to the washroom, giving a brief glance at the other boys drowsily stumbling by, and washed his face and neatly combed his hair, then went to the dining room to sit in his usual seat.

The remarkably voluptuous red-headed housemother placed his breakfast on his table. Just as he was about to take a bite from his meal of bread, milk, and fruit, Kazuya suddenly shouted in surprise.

The housemother, who had been sitting on a chair in the corner with her legs crossed, smoking tobacco and reading the morning newspaper, looked up in alarm.

"What's wrong?! Find something in your food that's not supposed to be there?"

"No, the food is delicious. It's just that headline...!?"

Kazuya asked to see the housemother's newspaper, then skimmed it frenziedly.

A rage-provoking headline leapt from the page:

{Another triumph from Inspector de Blois!
Fortune-teller Roxane murder case cracked!}

The inspector had once again taken the credit for solving the case, just as he always did. The article went on to state that the Arab maid had been arrested, and that she also happened to be very beautiful, and perhaps for that reason, the inspector had enthusiastically interrogated her, and then....

“What!?”

The granddaughter who had inherited the estate of the fortune-teller—that intimidating woman who had gone to blows with the maid—had given the inspector a hot kiss as an expression of her thanks. Kazuya didn’t particularly care about that part—but then he read that she had also gifted the inspector a luxury yacht.

And the inspector had laughingly declared that he would immediately take the yacht out on a cruise that very weekend...

“A yacht!?” Kazuya gave the newspaper back to the housemother, and sat back down in his chair. He thought to himself for a few seconds: *That congratulatory kiss and that luxury yacht, by all rights, ought to belong to Victorique. I can’t abide such unjust conduct! Damn that drill-headed inspector!*, then stood up.

“Victori-ique!”

After running up the narrow labyrinth of stairs to the top floor of St. Marguerite’s Library, what awaited Kazuya that morning was only an unexpectedly empty conservatory. He checked the clock; it was still just eight in the morning, around the time when Victorique would be heading to the conservatory.

Kazuya once again made the several-minute trip down the maze-like stairs. On his way down, he heard the clang of the hydraulic elevator in motion, and assumed that a staff member had boarded it.

When he ran out of the library, he bumped hard into another student who happened to be walking to class.

“Eek!”

“I-I’m sorry—oh, it’s you, Avril.”

A young English girl with short blond hair and long supple legs was standing there. The photograph that she had been holding fluttered down to the ground. Kazuya bent down and retrieved it for her.

It was a picture of a young man. He wore an unassuming smile, but his face was alluringly handsome, brimming with a refreshing charm that beguiled anyone who looked at him.

Kazuya's shoulders slumped a little. "Good morning, Avril.... Who is this, your boyfriend...?"

"Ha, ha, ha! Oh, no, Kujou, of course not!" Avril laughed gaily, and boisterously slapped Kazuya's back. He groaned in pain. Perhaps girls possessed a surprising amount of physical strength.

"Oh, this is Ned," said Avril.

"Huh?"

"Never heard of him? It's Ned Baxter. He's a stage actor in England, and he's really popular right now. He's not just very handsome, but also a good actor."

"Hmm. Are you his fan?"

"Not really." Avril shook her head. "But a friend of mine back home sent it to me, so I want to cherish it."

"Oh..."

Avril carefully put the photograph back in her pocket. "See you in class!"

"S-sure."

"Should I tell you another scary story later?"

"No! ...This time I'll tell you one."

"Even though you're a scaredy-cat?"

Kazuya reeled in shock at her words. But Avril showed no signs of noticing, and only merrily waved at him and ran away.

A "*scaredy-cat*"... Kazuya took a deep breath, and took off running himself, leaving the school grounds and heading toward the village.

He crossed the main street, busy with people, carriages, and lately, automobiles, and entered the local police station.

The small brick building, its walls overgrown with ivy, was old enough that it looked as if it could collapse at any moment. The glass door of the front entrance was riven with cracks, and the turquoise-colored tiles laid out upon the floor were chipped and worn.

The largest room on the third floor was even more luxurious than that of the police chief, a clear indication that it had been commandeered by a son of the aristocracy. Kazuya strode directly into the room, with the two hand-holding deputies, chatting noisily with each other, unable to stop him. Inspector Gréville de Blois looked up, startled.

Despite the fact that this room was part of a police station, the walls were lined with numerous high-priced dolls. It was a deeply disquieting room that made no bones about the occupant's tastes.

"...Hi there, Kujou."

"In-inspector, you ... blockhead!"

"What?!"

A group of other men working at the station gathered around to see what the fuss was about. The two deputies stationed themselves in front of the door with their linked hands blocking the way, while a crowd of people jostled to get a good view of the famous nobleman inspector and a young Asian boy glaring daggers at each other.

"I read this morning's paper. Do you mind explaining yourself?"

"Well..." Inspector de Blois hastily began racking his brain for excuses. "I didn't ask for that kiss, she just planted it on me, and she's awfully old by my standards, so I wasn't particularly pleased about it in the first place...."

"I'm not talking about the kiss!"

"Huh?"

“The luxury yacht! And the family’s gratitude. Those don’t belong to you, but to someone else, to Victori—mmph!?”

The second Kazuya started to utter Victorique’s name, Inspector de Blois leapt across the room in a running jump and swooped down on him. He pressed a hand to Kazuya’s mouth and glowered at him, the menacing gaze of his bloodshot eyes commanding him to shut up.

The onlookers whispered among themselves, straining to hear what was going on. As the inspector held down Kazuya’s throat and mouth with both arms, he slowly inched closer to the door, then extended his leg and violently kicked the door closed.

At last he released his hand from Kazuya’s mouth. Kazuya wheezed for air.

“Watch what you say. Don’t let the cat out of the bag now,” hissed the inspector.

“No, you listen to me!”

“Oh, fine, very well! You’ve got me, you hopeless man, you. I cannot win out against such passion.”

“Excuse me...?”

“I had planned to take the yacht out this weekend by myself and frolic in nature to my heart’s content, with a sort of ‘man and the sea’ theme. But I have no choice now. I’ll have to invite the two of you as well.” The inspector exhaled an overly dramatic sigh. And then he sat lightly on the edge of the desk, reached out to take a doll from the shelves to hug it to his chest, and began to lovingly caress its long hair.

He paid no mind to Kazuya, who was shrinking away from him as if he were some sort of pervert. “As for her...” he murmured to himself.

“Her?”

“I mean ... Victorique. If I make a request, I may be able to get

special permission for her to go out. After all, I am Inspector Gréville de Blois. That's the least I can do. Hmm..."

Kazuya tilted his head dubiously. "Permission for her to go out?"

"Oh, nothing.... Until we meet again this weekend, then. I'll contact you later with the details."

Inspector de Blois took one of the doll's hands and waved bye-bye at Kazuya. This was much too bizarre for Kazuya, and he couldn't flee the room fast enough.

"...So, you ended up making plans for this weekend?" asked Victorique.

Kazuya had once again run up the labyrinthine staircase at St. Marguerite's Library, and found that since his last visit, Victorique, the beautiful pipe-smoking girl, had come back to set up camp in the conservatory. Many heavy-looking books were spread out on the floor in front of her, radiating in all directions. Victorique didn't bother to look up as she spoke to him, instead burying her head in her books, her long blond hair strewn onto the ground like a turban come undone. While inclining an ear toward Kazuya, she continued to flip through pages one after the other, apparently capable of reading difficult books and holding a conversation at the same time.

"Yeah, that's what happened."

"...With Gréville?"

Kazuya puffed out his chest triumphantly. "I wasn't able to talk him into letting you have the yacht altogether, but at least I can claim this small victory for now."

Victorique languidly turned her head, and looked up, aghast, at Kazuya's energized expression, burning with righteous indignation and flushed with success. Her eyes were a mournful shade of green, the eyes of an aged person who had lived for far too long. She spoke in a husky voice like that of an old woman, and yet it was deeply resonant. "I just want to ask one thing."

“Yes, yes, and what might that be?”

“Kujou, do you like Gréville?”

“Are you kidding me?! I hate that guy. He makes me want to throw up!”

“Let me ask another thing. Is it fun for you, Kujou, to spend your precious weekend with that Gréville whom you hate so much?”

“Not in the least! ...Huh?” For a moment, Kazuya was stupefied. Then he sank to the ground in a confused heap. “...Wait, how did that happen?”

“That’s what I was about to ask. But still...” Victorique raised her head from her books, and broodingly smoked her pipe, while completely oblivious to Kazuya’s dejection. Mellow sunlight filtered in through the skylights, shining upon the girl’s white skin as she looked up to the sky. “I see.... That means I can leave this prison. Gréville did say that he would get special permission for me...!”

Kazuya was too depressed to pay attention to her enigmatic whispers. “A weekend with the inspector.... How did it come to this? Well, he didn’t seem happy about it either, so maybe I can consider it a draw. Even so... could he at least do something about his hairstyle? It’s rather embarrassing to walk around with him looking like that....”

By the time he returned to awareness, he noticed that Victorique had stood up.

She stood at around one hundred and forty centimeters tall. The sight of her with her long blond hair draped down to the ground, her pallid skin, and shining emerald-green eyes, gave the curious impression, not of a human, but of an exquisite doll that had come to life.

Kazuya rose with her. He seldom saw Victorique standing up, but whenever she did, he always found himself amazed at the smallness of her body. Her diminutive blond head only came up to chest or waist-high on Kazuya, and he was already of small build for a boy.

She craned her neck up to look at him, as if he were speaking to a child.

“I’ll begin preparations for the trip,” she said.

“...Huh? But there’s still several more days until the weekend.”

A peculiar look of chagrin crossed Victorique’s face, and she silently began walking away ... to the hydraulic staff elevator, where she pressed the button to open the wrought-iron doors, and stepped through.

Kazuya made a strangled sound.

“...What’s wrong, Kujou?”

“Victorique, why are you getting in the elevator?”

Victorique turned around and removed the pipe from her lips.

“Because I have permission to use it. This elevator is for the use of staff members and me. ...What happened? Why do you look like you’re going to burst into tears?”

“No, it’s just that I was under the impression that you climbed that maze of stairs, too.... I thought we both shared the same misery....”

“What a ridiculous idea. The only one here stupid enough to climb this staircase day after day is you, Kujou. Come to think of it....”

Victorique’s eyes took on a faraway look. “When I was riding the elevator up this morning, you were on the staircase at the same time, weren’t you. But you seemed to be in a great hurry, so I didn’t call out to you.”

“...Please do bother to call out! I come here to meet you, after all!”

The iron latticed doors closed, blind to Kazuya’s despair. He rushed after her and pleaded, “Let me ride, too.”

“I can’t. This may only be used by the staff and by me. In the meantime, you can sluggishly drag your thighs down the staircase, and reflect oh so bitterly on your suffering. For someone like you who spends all his time studying, this is fine exercise. Go on, build

up that strength of yours for nothing.”

Kazuya staggered in shock. In the island country in the Far East where he was born and raised, his two older brothers were not only top-ranked in their grades, but also cultivated their physical prowess to an equal extent, and they would order Kazuya to run laps around the neighborhood or do push-ups at every opportunity. Now he realized that since he came to Sauvure, he hadn't done anything that could be considered exercise. Incidentally, his brothers left behind in his home country were both large and brawny, and when they were younger, the two of them would often dole out beatings to the naughty children in the neighborhood. When they grew up, his rowdy eldest brother became a scholar, and his second eldest brother, who was quick at making escapes, entered the government. Kazuya was still not quite sure whether their success was simply a matter of being in the right place at the right time....

As Kazuya stood there, taken unawares by a flood of memories, Victorique put on a feigned smile and energetically waved her small hand at him. “So long, my friend. Let us meet at the bottom.”

“W-wait... Victori-ique!?”

The iron cage jerked downward with an unsympathetic clang, allowing only Victorique to descend with it.

four

[4]

Soon enough, the weekend arrived, bringing with it a dolefully cloudy sky to shroud the silent grounds of St. Marguerite's School.

The student dormitory overlooked a corner of the campus on the side of a gently sloping hill. Although it was nominally a mere student dormitory, it was actually a residence for children of noble blood. Silk curtains fluttered in the windows of the two-story building, constructed of high-quality oak. No expense was spared in furnishing the interior, from the spacious rooms granted to each and every student, to the dining hall with its sparkling chandeliers.

Kazuya and Victorique were engaged in an argument in front of the dormitory.

"...Why did you have to bring so much luggage?! You're a strange one, Victorique."

"This brain of mine has exhausted its intellectual powers to determine the absolute minimum necessary to carry ... for travel...." Victorique's voice trailed off sheepishly.

But Kazuya was red-faced, and he pointed at the suitcase, twice her size, that she had set on the ground. "Why is such a huge amount of luggage necessary for a day trip on a yacht?! It's almost like you're running away from home. This is big enough for the both of us to fit inside!"

"If I say it's necessary, then it's necessary!" Victorique stubbornly insisted.

But Kazuya wouldn't back down either. "But why do you need more luggage than I brought when I moved here? And I came all the way from the Far East. Let's see... It took me about a month by ship to get here. Anyway, Victorique, are you going to carry this all by yourself?"

“Of course not.”

“Then...?”

“You’re going to carry it, Kujou.”

“You dummy!” Kazuya opened the huge suitcase and began to inspect the contents, brushing off Victorique’s fretful attempts to stop him. She protested, “You can’t just open someone’s luggage without their permission...” and followed up with, “This is a violation of my privacy!” and so on and so forth, but at this point, nothing could stop Kazuya.

Miss Cécile, who happened to saunter by, started when she saw the two of them. “...You’re always so chummy together whenever I see you. But ... what are you doing?”

“Just in time. Here, Miss Cécile.” Kazuya looked up and tossed something at her. She hastily caught it.

“But that’s my compass...!” moaned Victorique sadly.

“Yachts already have that sort of thing on board. Oh, you don’t need this life jacket, either. And then... One change of clothes is enough, not this whole pile of outfits. Hmm... Why would you bring a set of tableware?! And a chair?! What are you, a refugee?!”

In the end, Victorique was left with only a single bag of a size that she could comfortably carry on her small shoulders, and the two of them were finally ready to peacefully set off on their journey. Kazuya entrusted the huge suitcase to Cécile, and began walking toward the village.

“Kujou, a man like you is nothing more than...” Victorique spoke in a tone of disappointment. “...an overbearing fusspot.”

“That’s not true.”

“They say that traveling tests the bonds of friendship, and even good friends may discover unexpected flaws in each other....”

“What are you talking about? Oh, Victorique, you better run! I want

us to take the train leaving at fifty-four past the hour.”

“Ugh...”

They ran to the only train station in the village. It was a small structure, marked with a round clock on a triangular roof. Each time a steam locomotive pulled into the station, the small building shook violently, vibrating the feet of those standing on it.

Kazuya walked up to the ticketing booth, but Victorique simply stood and stared at it absentmindedly.

“Victorique, what about your ticket?”

“...My ticket?”

“You’re supposed to buy it here. Come on, take out your wallet.” Kazuya opened her wallet, but was startled to see it crammed full of bills, and quickly closed it again. He bought her ticket himself, and pulled her by the hand to the platform.

They ran through the crowd of waiting adults like rats running along the floor of a kitchen. The train they intended to board would depart the platform at any moment. Kazuya looked back at Victorique, and tugged her by the hand. She ran as fast as she could, her blond hair streaming out behind her small body. Kazuya lifted her onto the train, and then jumped in after her.

The train carrying them began to accelerate, leaving the platform of the small station behind it with a thundering bellow....

Victorique stood near the door, gripping the handrail, her blond hair whipped by the wind into a puffy shape resembling cotton candy. Her green eyes stared wide in amazement.

The train gradually picked up speed.

Standing figures dotted the vineyards that sprawled over the village ... and rapidly sped by, until the eye could no longer follow them.

Kazuya guided the motionless Victorique to her seat. She obediently followed him. They reached an empty booth and sat down facing

each other in the hard seats, resting for a moment.

Then Kazuya yelled, “Why did you have to bring so much money with you?!”

“Because it’s necessary.”

“You don’t need *that* much! If people were to see you carrying around a wallet like that, pickpockets would make you their new best friend. My goodness, you startled me.... Victorique?”

Victorique pressed her small hands to the window frame like a child, riveted by the scenery.

Kazuya took a hesitant peek at her face. He worried that she might be angry after being lectured by him all morning long, but she showed no signs of anger, and merely stared outside of the window in awe, her emerald-green eyes opened wide.

Vivid greenery festooned the magnificent backdrop of the mountains. Buildings and roads slowly multiplied, transforming into city streets. The train departed the mountains where the school was located, and approached the towns.

Victorique took in the changing sights feverishly. On occasion, she would shift her gaze to the train wheels chugging along noisily, or the smokestack spewing black smoke.

She looks like someone who’s never taken a train before.... Kazuya stayed silent, and kept idle watch on Victorique, who stared out of the window hungrily.

Their final destination was a bustling city on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea. It was a large port city, lively enough that it was hard to imagine that it belonged to the same country as their village in the foothills of the Alps. A faint odor of saltwater lingered in the air even as far as the station platform.

Kazuya ushered Victorique onto the platform. This station contained many more platforms than the one in their village, and

the ceiling was so high that one could go dizzy just from looking at it. Someone could easily get lost in this place unless they were careful.

Adults who seemed to be old hands at train travel busily rushed to and fro, and red-uniformed porters scrambled past, carrying large suitcases. At this urban station where countless people crossed paths, crowds of travelers came and went on the various platforms. But there were few children in sight. From time to time, the adults passing through would look curiously upon Kazuya and Victorique, who were standing by themselves.

Victorique stood on the platform and restlessly examined her surroundings. Kazuya finally located the fare gate, and tried to lead Victorique there, but she kept darting about deliriously, beside herself with curiosity, and it was quite impossible to move her along. Kazuya summoned up his courage, and took hold of her hand firmly.

Her hand was small. It felt more like he was guiding along his young sister rather than someone who was his classmate from school.

“Don’t slip away from me, Victorique.”

Victorique said nothing, and continued to swing her head around dizzily. Whenever she discovered something unfamiliar, she would ask, “What’s that?”

“That’s an ice cream shop.”

“What about that?”

“A newsstand. ...Hey, walk straight, or you’ll get trampled on.” Kazuya wrapped his arms around her small body and crossed the street with her.

The wide street was divided into several lanes where carriages and automobiles sped through without stopping. The sidewalks overflowed with people, deftly navigating the intersecting carriages and cars with sure steps, or boarding carriages. Eye-catching

storefronts lined the sidewalks, bedecking the windows with extravagant pastries, dresses, hats, and folding fans.

The scent of salt again wafted through the air. They were getting closer to the ocean.

Kazuya came to a stop, and put his fingers to his mouth to whistle. A four-wheeled coach came clip-clopping up, and pulled over in front of them.

Victorique was amazed. "...Was that magic?"

"This is how you call them. Come on, get in."

Once they climbed into the carriage, Victorique turned her head to the window, and continued to observe the people and buildings passing by, as if she were seeing something very unusual. Kazuya informed the driver of their destination, and then asked Victorique, "Say, Victorique... You don't get out much, do you?"

She didn't reply. But Kazuya thought he saw the look on her face suddenly darken, and decided against asking anything more.

By the time they reached the seaside of the Gulf of Lyon for their meeting with the inspector, Kazuya was already completely drained of energy.

five

[5]

Alongside a large wharf that faced the Mediterranean Sea were anchored the luxury yachts of nobles and men of means alike, in addition to foreign passenger vessels of exotic design. Sailors of varied skin colors ran between ships and shore in a constant flurry of activity.

A young man stood on top of a sparkling yacht moored in a corner of this harbor. With his horizontally-striped sailor shirt, skin-tight white pantaloons, a scarlet bandanna tied at his throat, and as usual, an aggressive point to his head—it could only be Inspector Gréville de Blois.

Once the inspector caught sight of Kazuya and Victorique, he cheerfully waved. “Ahoy there, matey!”

Kazuya waved back weakly, his face the picture of exhaustion.

Inspector de Blois nimbly jumped down from the boat and landed in front of them, whereupon he held one foot out and assumed an exaggerated pose. Then a perturbed look suddenly crossed his face. “I’ve been wondering about this for a while now, but can you explain to me again how I ended up spending the weekend with you two?”

“It’s been baffling me, too. ...Nice yacht, isn’t it?”

“I’ve named it ‘The Blois.’ By the way, Kujou.” The inspector’s expression abruptly turned serious. He bent down at the waist so that Victorique, standing beside them, could also listen—since their height difference would otherwise be at least forty centimeters—and whispered, “Now, about that first gunshot fired in the neighboring room...”

“Inspector, you’re taking advantage of Victorique again—” cried Kazuya, his temper flaring up, but Victorique nudged him to stay

quiet. When he peeked at her face and saw that her expression indicated that she wanted to listen, he reluctantly fell silent.

“What that bullet hit was a mirror, and it shattered into dust. Apparently, Roxane used it for her fortune-telling. It seems to have been an old and pedigreed antique.”

“A magic mirror, you say...” murmured Victorique.

Inspector de Blois shuddered. “There were a lot of tools in her room that she used for fortune-telling. We also found—”

“A silver jar full of wine, a copper jar filled with oil, and a glass jar with water in it.”

The inspector made a choked noise, and he stared at Victorique as if looking upon something terrifying.

Victorique shrugged her shoulders. “These are all tools used for divination, Gréville.”

“You sure know a lot about that sort of thing. Even though you didn’t even know how to buy a train ticket,” interrupted Kazuya. He was crestfallen when the other two didn’t respond.

“And then there’s that Arab maid...” continued the inspector.

“Hmm.”

“She’s quite a beauty.”

“Inspector, that was already in the newspaper,” interjected Kazuya again.

“That maid blurted out some cryptic words about her motive. We looked for an Arabic-language interpreter, but couldn’t find any reliable ones, so we’re still unable to fully communicate with her. The translation we have goes something like this.” Inspector de Blois stopped himself, then lowered his voice. “This is revenge for the box’....”

Victorique looked up and met his gaze.

This was the first time that Kazuya had ever seen the two of them make eye contact. He swallowed hard and watched them carefully, wondering what would happen next, but nothing else came of it.

Then some strange voices rang out from afar. “Inspecto-o-o-o-or!”

“...o-o-o-or!”

The three looked up to find a familiar pair of men speeding toward them. It was Inspector de Blois’ two deputies in their rabbit-skin hunting caps, running up with their hands amiably linked.

“What’s going on?” The inspector puffed out his chest and snapped his fingers at the two men. They halted, and exclaimed in unison, “Inspector, nice pose!” “Absolutely smashing!”

As they offered up insincere praises, Kazuya glared at them out of the corner of his eye. *The inspector is so strange because they keep licking his boots like this.... He’ll never fix his hairstyle at this rate....*

Kazuya turned to Victorique, about to say the same to her, but in the meantime she had vanished. He anxiously looked around for her, and found that she had jumped onto the yacht and was eagerly inspecting it, apparently seized by curiosity again.

“Inspector, it’s an emergency! The Arab maid—”

“—has escaped!”

The inspector gasped, “R-really?!” and jumped up. He made a start toward the deputies, then seemed to remember something, and came back. “Listen, Kujou, I have to leave right now! You can go on the yacht, but you’re not allowed to pilot it, because I’m the only one here with a license.”

“What?! You’ll let us go on board but won’t let us take it out? ...But that’s no fun!”

“I know! Have patience!” the inspector said firmly. Then he took his deputies’ hands and ran off.

Kazuya speechlessly watched them go. *“Don’t take it out,” he says....*

“Have patience,” he says.... Are you serious?!

Now feeling tired to the bone, he looked over at Victorique. She had just jumped back off the yacht, carelessly dirtying her fluffy, lacy dress, and disheveling the thin strands of her glossy blond hair.

Victorique glanced briefly at the sight of the inspector hurrying away, then airily called out to Kazuya, “Hey, you. So this yacht belonged to the granddaughter of Roxane the fortune-teller?”

“Yup, seems that way.”

“The granddaughter inherited her estate, which means that this yacht was originally Roxane’s.”

“...Yeah.”

“Hmm. So, if that’s the case...”

Kazuya was still disappointed about not being able to pilot the yacht, and gave Victorique only apathetic replies. Sensing this, she pouted, then shoved at him something she had been holding in her hand.

It was a white envelope.

“What’s that?”

“I found it inside. It’s an invitation ... addressed to Roxane.”

Kazuya took the envelope and opened it, his curiosity piqued.

They sat on the edge of the yacht and read the letter, which was written in refined French. The contents consisted of an invitation to a dinner tonight on board a luxury ship moored on the coast nearby.

“I’m wondering about this part,” said Victorique.

“Yeah...”

The first section listed the menu, in which the following words were

emphasized in distinctly large, ornamented letters.

{The main dish will be hare.}

Hare—

This was the same animal that the fortune-teller Roxane raised in large numbers at her mansion.

The animals that she had her hunting dog hunt down and kill....

And then there was something else—the title of the dinner.

{~A Garden Box Evening~}

“...We’ve heard that word ‘box’ before, haven’t we?” said Kazuya.

“Yeah, we did.”

They looked at one another. Victorique’s expression was already changing into the face she wore when pestering Kazuya with her cries of boredom. He was unable to describe exactly how it was different, but it was a face that he recognized from experience.

Then Kazuya looked back at the yacht.

The shiny, luxurious yacht.

It looked enticing enough ... but without being able to move it ... it also looked rather dull.

Kazuya and Victorique shared a nod.

“Shall we go take a look?” he asked.

“Mmm.”

They followed the directions on the invitation, and by the time they finally located the ship, dusk had already fallen. An usher was waiting at the ship, berthed at the dim shoreline. After checking their invitation, he let them board.

They seemed to be the last passengers, and the ship soon cast off, moving in time with the sound of the waves.

Huh...?

Once on board, all was quiet. Ever since Kazuya laid eyes on the ship while it was still docked at shore, its color was so dark that it seemed to melt into the night, and one needed to squint in order to tell that it was really a ship, instead of a dark phantom. The smokestack was much too thick for the size of the ship, and it loomed above ominously, facing the night sky.

Kazuya felt a shudder run through his body. *Huh? I feel like...* he thought to himself, puzzled. *I feel like I've heard the name of this ship before.... No, I can't quite recall where. Oh, well.*

The ship navigated through the sea as if parting the waters.

The sound of thunder crashed in the distance. Clouds were amassing in the sky.

A name was painted on the bow of the ship in inconspicuous letters.

The Queen Berry, it read...

monologue one

I was cold and hungry.

Sauvure was supposed to be a wealthy country, but to the orphans who huddled in downtown alleyways, it was no better than an icy forest.

It had been three days since I left the orphanage. I survived on what little I was able to fish out of the garbage, or from what I stole, but I wouldn't be able to live like this for much longer.

One day, I felt an adult hand suddenly grab me roughly by the shoulder, and lift me into the air.

They finally found me, I said to myself. *They're taking me back to the orphanage*. But I didn't have the strength to resist.

They threw me into a carriage sealed with iron bars.

Almost like a cage for an animal, I thought.

It was dark inside, but my eyes were used to dim light, and I could make out the shapes of several other children who were in the cage with me. They all wore rags, and shivered from the cold. Most of them were boys, but there were a few girls, too.

The carriage took off. I heard the muffled sound of horse hooves pounding the ground.

The man who grabbed me earlier spoke to the coachman. There were two men, and they were discussing something.

"I located a Sauvurean child."

"Any living relatives?"

"Nah, it's probably an orphan. No one will bother looking for it. We

won't have any problems.”

...*What are they talking about?* I couldn't help straining my ears to listen.

“Where to next?”

“Hmm... There's still two more. We should be finishing up soon.”

“Piece of cake.”

It was unbearably cold, and I had to cling to the children next to me to stay warm.

The carriage shook from side to side.

Where could they be taking us...?

one

chapter two — the dark supper

[1]

Darkness enveloped the luxury liner. An usher, whose dark complexion hinted at his foreign origins, wordlessly led Kazuya and Victorique on board, with lamp in hand to light the way.

The ship began to navigate through the water, sloshing through rolling waves in the quietude of the night.

When Kazuya happened to look up at the sky, he realized that the stars twinkling in the darkness appeared to suddenly cut off at a certain point. A black wall stood against the sky, as if it had dropped down from above. He squinted at the dark space until he was able to make out the shape of a imposingly large smokestack.

That smokestack rose into the air like an ebony tower. It looked somehow far too thick for the size of the ship, throwing it off balance.

“Let’s go, Kujou.”

Kazuya hastily quickened his steps to catch up with the sound of Victorique’s voice. They descended rapidly down a staircase. He thought that the interior would be more brightly lit, but for some reason it was just as gloomy as the rest of the ship, with the usher’s lamp their only light just as before.

They were brought to a dining room with a long, narrow table and a sparkling chandelier. But the chandelier emitted no light, and the room was dim... no, completely darkened. Plate settings for ten diners were laid out on the long table, already piled high with steaming hot food. A candle burned beside each set of plates, but the ten faltering flames in the darkness were barely bright enough to light up their immediate vicinity.

There were no servers. Normally, each dish should have been served one by one in courses, but here they were already set on the table for each diner, from the hors d'oeuvres to the main dish.

Nine adults sat at their seats in the shadows, and had apparently started on their dinners, their activities narrated by the clattering noises of their knives and forks.

A seat in the corner sat empty and alone. Kazuya guessed that this was the seat that belonged to the murdered Roxane. He turned to the usher and asked, "Since there's two of us, could you bring another—huh?"

There was no one there. Kazuya opened the door and peeked down the hallway. The orange glow of the usher's lamp flickered and faded away at the other end.

"Um, excuse me...?"

He was still close enough that he should have been able to hear Kazuya's voice, but he made no attempt to look back.

A feeling of unease gripped Kazuya. He hurried down the dark hallway in pursuit. But the light of the usher's lamp swayed from side to side, and grew smaller and smaller, as if he had broken into a run....

Why is he running away from me...?

Kazuya emerged onto the darkened deck of the ship, but the usher was nowhere to be found. He searched around himself in bewilderment.

How bizarre.... He couldn't have just vanished. He had to have come this way!

Then Kazuya heard the sound of something plunging into the water in the distance.

He ran across the deck and leaned over the railing.

The orange lamplight was already disappearing into the dark sea,

accompanied by the faint sounds of splashing water. After the usher guided on board the last passengers—Kazuya and Victorique—he had jumped into a rowboat and escaped. It was too dark outside to see if there was a silhouette in the small boat, but Kazuya could guess who it would be. He leaned over the railing and watched the boat go, dumbfounded.

What the...?! What on earth is going on here?

He stood immobile for a few minutes. Then his eyes drifted to the side of the ship, where some words in small, unassuming print jumped out at him.

The Queen Berry.

It was definitely a name that he had heard somewhere before, he thought to himself. Kazuya searched his memories.

...But came up with nothing. He gave up on following the man who had disappeared in the boat, and walked across the deck back to the dining room.

“Hey, Victo— ...rique...?”

The guests were eating their dinner in the gloomy dining room, the candles beside their plates serving as their only source of illumination. The empty seat in the corner ... was now occupied by Victorique’s small form, as she shoveled forkfuls of her luxurious dinner into her mouth. Her delicate hands manipulated knife and fork to transfer food into her dainty mouth with graceful, but swift movements. She was also chewing quickly, and the meal on her plate was rapidly disappearing.

Kazuya approached her in dismay. “H-hey, Victorique, wait!”

“Munch, munch... What do you want, Kujou? I’m busy eating here. Be quiet.”

“But I’m here, too.”

“...And?” replied Victorique, sounding mystified. She finished the last bite of hors d’oeuvres and moved her knife and fork to the fish

course.

“I’m hungry, too!”

“But Kujou, that invitation was addressed to Roxane.”

“...So?”

“Roxane is one person. Therefore, this dinner that we obtained through her invitation is also only enough for one.”

“...I get it. I should’ve known you were that kind of person. Say, do you have any cookies or something in your bag? I can try to manage with those.”

Victorique looked up at him as she used a knife to smoothly peel away the bones from her fish. A peculiar smile appeared on her face. At a glance, the expression on her undeniably beautiful face seemed to be a cheerful one, but the edges of her mouth were tense, and a muscle was twitching in one of her cheeks.

...This was how Victorique looked when she was angry.

“...I *did* have some.”

“Yay! Let me have them, then.”

“They’re in my suitcase.”

“...Huh?”

“Along with all of the other equipment that my brain determined to be necessary. I also had a set of tableware, chairs, and emergency rations.”

“...But you don’t need the tableware or chairs, do you?”

“Right now, they’re inside my suitcase, I suppose in Cécile’s room. You get what you deserve.” Victorique snorted and turned away from Kazuya.

Then she continued in a soft voice. “Kujou, you may have come

here from the Orient because of your excellent grades, and you may come from a strict military background, but don't think you're fooling anyone with your arrogant nit-pickings. Because you're just pigheaded and full of yourself. I have no cookies to share with such a person. Hmph!"

Kazuya choked in shock. *I know I'm too inflexible and serious, and these are faults of mine, but still...*

Victorique ignored him and moved onto her meat course in a sulk. Her pride was clearly still hurt from the time Kazuya took charge while they were setting off for their trip.

So I'm pigheaded, and full of myself, and I fool people with my arrogant nit-pickings.... Victorique is absolutely the last person I want to hear that from!

As Kazuya silently balled his hands into fists, he felt something behind him poke him on his bottom. He turned around in surprise, and saw a young white man looking up at him from a seat nearby.

"Oh, pardon me.... I must have been too loud."

"Not at all... Do sit down."

But there were no empty chairs. When Kazuya looked puzzled, the man gave him a warm smile and patted his own lap.

"You can sit right here."

"I'm sorry?! No, thank—"

"Sit down, Kujou," Victorique muttered sourly in a low voice. Kazuya resigned himself to sitting down on this stranger's lap. He looked over his shoulder at the man's face, which was wreathed in a friendly smile.

He had seen this face before, thought Kazuya. It was an attractive one, but because of his good-natured smile, the impression he gave was more that of a kind person rather than a handsome one. He seemed to be an Englishman, and the vaguely stiff accent of his Queen's English brought to mind that charming exchange student,

Avril.

And speaking of Avril...

“Sir, might you be a stage actor from England?”

As soon as Kazuya asked this, the man’s face lit up. “Have you heard of me?”

“A girl in my class had a photograph of you. She said your name was Ned Baxter.”

“My, I’m so happy to hear that. Why don’t you have some of my meat? Go on, don’t be shy.”

He cut off a large chunk of meat and lifted his fork to Kazuya’s mouth. Kazuya gave a startled blink and ate it in one bite. The meat was so delicious that it seemed to melt in his mouth. This Ned Baxter seemed to be a light eater, and had left most of his food on the plate. He eagerly continued to feed Kazuya by hand.

Victorique gave them a sidelong glance, and remarked in a derisive tone, “...You make a cute couple.”

“That’s enough, Victorique.”

“Come on, have some more,” said Ned.

“Uh, thank you very much....”

Ned Baxter began reminiscing about the English drama scene and expounding on Shakespeare’s plays. His jovial voice echoed through the dining room, which was otherwise still enough to hear a pin drop.

The other guests continued to eat their dinners in silence.

And ten or so minutes later...

The sounds of clinking silverware had faded away, and Ned’s voice had also gone quiet.

In the dark dining room, the only light was the weak flame of the candles, flickering dully and rhythmically before each of the ten seats. And as for each guest who had been sitting at those seats...

Some were collapsed bonelessly upon the table, or were leaning deeply against their chairs with mouths wide open. Faint breaths that resembled snores trickled from their lips, and quickly evaporated.

Every guest had fallen fast asleep. Kazuya tumbled from Ned's lap and crashed to the floor face first.

The dining room descended into dead silence.

There was no other sound but the hiss of the candlelight.

Until finally...

The door quietly opened, and someone walked inside.

A twelfth person carefully peered into the faces of each guest, rounding the table with soft footsteps to confirm that everyone was asleep. The intruder stumbled over Kazuya's fallen body and yelped aloud in surprise, then looked down at the boy in curiosity. Sleeping in the seat next to him was Victorique, her long blond hair spilling down like a sash, riveting the observer with her refined beauty. The intruder stared at the two of them, Kazuya on the floor and Victorique in the chair, with a look of suspicion.

Then the twelfth guest double-checked the nameplate in front of Victorique's seat. It read "Madame Roxane". ...And yet, unexpectedly, a young girl was sitting in this chair.

The eleven guests blissfully slept on, unaware of the silent intruder....

two

[2]

“Hey, Kujou. Wake up.”

“U-ugh...?”

“You overbearing, nitpicking fusspot of a foreign student. Wake up this instant.”

“...You’re the last person I want to hear that from, Victorique!” Kazuya angrily jolted awake. At the same time, he felt Victorique blow smoke up his nose. He waved the smoke away and broke into an attack of coughing. “Ugh, stop it, Victorique. My goodness, you can be so childish....”

A look of hurt pride passed over Victorique’s face.

But Kazuya ignored this, and looked around the room instead. “Huh? Where are we?”

“Another room. It’s the lounge,” answered Victorique, sullenly turning her head away from him.

They were in a lounge around the same width as the dining room they had been in previously. But unlike the previous room, the chandelier hanging from the ceiling was lit up so brightly that it stung their eyes.

Along the wall was a small stage with sheet music on display, as if a band had been playing there only moments before. Several small tables that looked as though they were meant for drinking or playing poker were arranged in the center of the room. In the corner, there was a bar counter, lined with many bottles of expensive wine.

The adults who had been in the dining room earlier were seated in chairs or sleeping on top of tables as if they were beds. Kazuya

looked around the bright room, and saw that the men largely appeared to be in their forties or older. They wore finely tailored suits, polished shoes and cufflinks, and carefully groomed beards. All of them were clearly men of high social status, but for now they held their heads and groaned in pain.

For some reason, the acrid smell of paint thinner hung faintly in the air. Kazuya felt it assail his nostrils every time he inhaled. If everyone was feeling ill, this smell could be another reason why.

Victorique sat quietly in the seat next to where Kazuya had been placed. Ned Baxter was next to her. He held his head in his hands and slumped over in discomfort.

Kazuya, whose head was also throbbing dully, looked over at Victorique. She seemed to be fine.

“...What happened?”

“It looks like someone drugged our food. By the time I woke up, all of us had been moved to this lounge.”

“Why?”

Victorique didn't respond. Instead, she eyed the inside of the lounge.

Kazuya was once again shocked at the fact that nearly all of the men were older. Ned was the youngest man there, at around his mid-twenties.

“There's only old men here, Victorique.”

“No, not quite. There's a woman over there.”

Kazuya followed Victorique's gaze.

A young woman was sitting by herself, resting her small, shapely rump on a table near the door. She was wearing a vermillion dress, and her sleek black hair that hung down to her waist made for a striking contrast against her red-clad body.

Sensing Kazuya's eyes upon her, she suddenly turned around to look back at him.

She wore eye-catching red lipstick that matched her dress. Her blue eyes shimmered, framed by long eyelashes. It may have been the effect of her baby-faced features, but for a moment, she looked as if she were a child who had put on adult clothing. Even so, she was probably in her early twenties. Her lips were pulled taut in an expression of firm resolve, as if she were willing to start an argument with someone at any minute.

The moans and fearful murmurs swelling through the lounge fell completely silent. No one moved a muscle, and merely gripped their heads in distress.

Victorique looked away from the woman in the red dress, and whispered to Kazuya, "Kujou, there's something strange here."

"...What?"

"There's one more person."

Kazuya blinked. "Are you sure? There were only enough seats for ten people, and you and I both came, too."

"But that's not it, Kujou. There's someone else besides us."

"How is that possible?"

Victorique stamped the ground in a fit of pique, frustrated that she wasn't getting through to Kazuya. She scowled, and started to speak much quicker than usual. "In other words, there were originally nine people in the dining room. After we came, there were eleven people. But ... see what happens if you count everyone now."

Kazuya did as Victorique requested and counted the moaning people in the lounge.

One, two, three...

Four... five... six...

Once he finished counting, he exclaimed incredulously, "You're

right! There's twelve people here!"

"Correct." Victorique nodded in satisfaction, apparently relieved that she had finally made herself clear. "So that means someone who wasn't in the dining room earlier slipped into the crowd in the meantime. That person is likely the culprit. He didn't partake of that dinner. He's the one who moved us here while we were unconscious. And now he's trying to pass himself off as one of us...."

Kazuya surveyed the lounge. The group of men were not only nursing headaches from the sedative, but were also darting their eyes around fearfully. Each time their gazes met, they would cry out in recognition, as if they remembered each others' faces from somewhere.

But the young Ned Baxter only stared in astonishment at his surroundings. "B-bloody hell... What happened?" he muttered to himself in consternation.

The woman in the red dress suddenly stood up, and shouted in fury, "What the hell is this?! Where are we? Damn it—Oh! It won't open!"

She gripped the doorknob with both hands and violently shook it. The eyes of everyone in the room were immediately drawn to her. The woman yanked her hands away from the doorknob, and turned back to the lounge with a look of terror on her face. "Why? Where are we? Why is the door locked?!"

No one had an answer.

The group of older men averted their eyes from her in distaste. Ned, Victorique, and Kazuya stared at the woman, who stood petrified in fear. Then the woman strode toward the three of them, and sank down in a seat nearby.

While on route to her seat, her small handbag smacked Kazuya directly in the head. "Ouch!" he cried out in pain.

The woman made no attempt to apologize, and merely looked down

at him and snorted. Ned asked him in her stead, "Are you all right?"

"Yes, thanks."

It was an awfully heavy handbag, thought Kazuya, looking askance at the woman.

Then he turned to Victorique and asked her softly, "Say, Victorique. What do you think is going on here?"

"...It's chaos," answered Victorique grumpily.

"Huh?"

"...There's nothing else I can say, other than the fact that there aren't enough fragments to use as materials for reconstruction."

"So, in other words, you have no idea," said Kazuya knowingly.

Victorique scowled, her white cheeks puffing out like a child's. She pinned Kazuya with a glare. "I am only saying that there's a lack of materials. It doesn't mean I have no idea."

"...Sounds like you're nitpicking."

"Ugh! Anyway, there's nothing I don't know. I just have to—"

"...Sounds like you're full of it."

"Argh!"

Kazuya and Victorique glared at each other, sparks flying between his jet-black eyes and her clear emerald-green eyes.

And then, several seconds later...

"Sorry..." said Kazuya, admitting defeat.

"Hmph. Just as long as you know."

Unable to defeat the power of her gaze, Kazuya automatically apologized, even though he had done nothing wrong.

three

[3]

Kazuya was steadily recovering from his sedative-induced headache, and he stood up and began to investigate the lounge. He took a peek inside the bar counter, but found nothing of particular interest. While he looked upon the bottles of wine that were lined up inside, Victorique walked up to him, and surveyed the bottles with a single sweep of her eyes.

“So there’s wine here.”

“Yeah...”

Victorique removed the stopper from one of the bottles, and poured some wine into a nearby glass. The deep purple-red liquid sparkled, reflecting the light of the chandeliers. She looked closely at the label on the bottle, then picked up the glass and lifted it to her nose for a sniff.

“This is old and expensive wine.”

“Really?”

Victorique nodded. “At least, according to the label....”

While the two of them were talking softly, Ned wandered up to them, still holding a hand to his head. “What are you kids up to?”

“Well, we were just wondering if we could find some clues about what’s going on here....”

“Be careful where you touch.”

Kazuya looked up at him, surprised at the tone of his low voice.

Ned grimaced. “If they drugged our food, there’s no telling what else could be lying around.”

“You’re right...”

Ned scanned the rest of the room, then walked up to a table where a tennis racket and ball had been left behind. The table looked as if someone had just been sitting beside it only moments ago. A whiskey bottle, ice, and two glasses had been placed on top. The ice was still frozen solid. Atop a nearby table lay scattered cards, as if the person sitting there had been playing a card game and just now stepped away for a break.

On the other side of the room, Kazuya went around the bar counter, then came back out and started to roam in the direction of the stage. A book of sheet music had been left open to what appeared to be the middle of a classical piece, looking as though someone had been standing there and playing it just a minute ago.

At that moment, a man suddenly stood up and shouted, “Stop wandering around!”

Kazuya and Ned both turned around, startled by the sudden angry scream.

The man was smartly dressed in an expensive suit and glittering, jewel-studded cufflinks. His dark brown hair was carefully combed and parted on one side, and his freckled cheeks were twitching with rage.

“Y-you all know that this ship is dangerous! Sit down and be quiet! There’s no telling what might happen if you keep moving around!”

“...What do you mean by that?” Victorique’s murmur carried across the hushed lounge from her seat in the corner.

The man swung his head around, but couldn’t identify anyone who looked like they possessed an old woman’s husky voice. He stiffened in bewilderment. “Who said that?!”

“I did.” Victorique calmly raised her hand, and the entire room turned to look at her.

Everyone gasped when they laid eyes upon the lone girl sitting in the corner. Victorique returned their gaze, her green eyes shining.

A chorus of admiring sighs swelled through the room at the sight of the girl with golden hair spilling down her tiny body like a turban come undone. “What a knockout! She’s gorgeous!” they whispered. The men had been shocked when they first saw her, but now they proceeded to scrutinize Victorique’s exquisite doll-like visage with intense interest.

Kazuya instinctively ran in front of Victorique and blocked their view.

“What are you doing?” she asked suspiciously.

“Protecting you from their threatening stares.”

“...You’re in my way. I can’t see.”

Kazuya glumly returned to his original spot.

The man who had been shouting angrily was now glowering at Victorique. “Children shouldn’t speak out of turn!”

His words startled Kazuya, and just as he was about to protest, he sensed movement from behind him. He looked up to see the woman in the red dress, a fiery look of resolve in her eyes.

“But mister, this ship is strange.”

The man turned to her, a scowl on his face.

The young woman pointed at a nearby table. “Look at this table. There’s a tennis racket, a ball, and a glass of whiskey. The ice hasn’t even melted yet. It’s like someone was playing at the tennis courts and came to have a drink in the lounge just a few minutes ago. And there’s playing cards all over this other table. But there’s nobody here besides us.”

“Silence, woman!” shouted the man. “Shut your mouth!”

The woman in the red dress blinked, stunned.

Ned, who was standing next to her, tried to defuse the situation. “Hey, mister, calm down. You have to admit, she has a—”

“Be quiet, you worthless actor!”

“...the hell did you say?!” Ned burst into a rage and clenched his hands into fists. The woman cried out, “Stop it!” and held his arms back.

Kazuya hesitantly volunteered, “But still...”

The man turned around and glared at him. “No talking, Oriental!”

Kazuya closed his mouth. Then he looked around the room; it seemed that the only ones fuming at the man’s outbursts besides Kazuya himself were Victorique, Ned, and the woman. The other seven people were men of middle age or slightly older. They huddled in their part of the room and kept the other four at a distance.

Ned and the woman approached Kazuya and Victorique. Ned grumbled quietly to Kazuya, “By his logic, the only ones allowed to talk here are old men like him.”

“Ugh...”

“What sort of reasoning is that. For God’s sake, what an arrogant bastard.” Ned continued to mumble complaints under his breath.

Victorique stood beside him. “This is chaos,” she said, her face somber.

The woman in the dress paced around the room, deep in thought. It seemed to be a habit of hers to walk exactly five steps, turn around and walk another five steps, then turn around again. Victorique watched this intently.

Among the twelve prisoners, the eight middle-aged men seemed to already know each other. Their complexions were ruddy, and all of them wore finely tailored suits, spit-shined leather shoes, and were meticulously groomed down to their trimmed mustaches.

Apparently, they hadn’t seen each other in quite a while, and were exchanging news of their lives in low tones. According to the bits and pieces of their conversation that drifted across the room, the group included highly-ranked officials in the Sauvure government, a

president of a major textile manufacturer, and veteran diplomats.

It may have been an ingrained habit on their part, but even at a time like this, they found it in themselves to trade stories bragging about their careers or the schools their children attended. But before long, the conversation ceased, and they leaned in close to one another with anxious expressions, whispering softly.

“Even so, this ship...”

“Yes. I didn’t notice it when I got on board, but it’s exactly like that box....”

“Impossible...”

The others listened to the men nervously whispering to each other. Ned cast circumspect glances at them from time to time, presumably wondering what they were talking about.

Kazuya kept silent, thinking to himself. *A ship... Food that was still warm... Card games...*

Uneasiness filled his chest at the thought of those words. He tried to remember what they meant, but nothing came to mind. Kazuya shook his head over and over again, trying to drive away that overpowering feeling of discomfort.

Victorique noticed his distress. “What’s wrong?”

“No, it’s nothing....” Kazuya looked down at Victorique’s searching expression. Then he slowly added, “It’s just that the name of this ship feels familiar. The Queen Berry, if I remember correctly. Plus...”

A feeling of apprehension gripped him as he spoke, and he frowned. The men in the lounge were now pinning him with a hard stare. Their faces, as pale as wax, were completely expressionless. Kazuya returned their gazes.

Why are they reacting like that...? he wondered to himself, his uneasiness growing deeper. *Right... and then there was that other thing. That vase...*

Kazuya turned his attention to the ornamental vase placed on a nearby antique shelf. Something was nagging him about this vase, but he would have to think about it some more before he could remember what it was.

He innocently reached out to touch that vase, and then...

The group of men gasped.

The well-dressed man from before stood up and shouted in horror, "Stop! Don't touch that vase!"

Then a whistling sound sliced through the air.

The arrow of a crossbow shot past, narrowly missing the top of Kazuya's head, and embedded itself into the wall.

The young woman clapped her hands over her mouth and stumbled backwards, her scream sticking in her throat. Ned Baxter made an odd squeak of astonishment. Even Victorique was stunned, and she stared up at the arrow with her emerald-green eyes opened wide.

For a moment, the room was silent.

Then the group of men started to shout all at once.

"I knew it!"

"This is the ship!"

They scrambled to their feet and rushed toward the door, some of them tripping over themselves while groaning aloud in fright.

Kazuya was frozen stiff, overcome with shock. Victorique and Ned grabbed him and shook him from side to side.

"Kid, are you all right?!"

"Hey! How does it feel to have a brush with death?"

Kazuya's mouth flapped open, but no sound would come out.

...He remembered.

The tale of that ship, where the arrow flew through the air the second someone had touched a vase....

Who had told him that story?

...It was Avril.

Just the other day, they had sat behind the main building at St. Marguerite's School, and she had playfully related that ghost story to him.

Yes, and on that ship...

...And by the time the coast guard got there, there was still warm food on the dinner plates of the ship, and the stoves were still burning, and card games were still in progress on the tables.... However! There was not a soul on board...!

All of the passengers and all of the crew members had vanished.... The ship was completely empty....

And when the rescue party came aboard the ship to investigate... When one of them accidentally touched a vase, an arrow came flying at him out of nowhere, and he nearly died....

So it ended up sinking to the bottom of the sea within minutes. With a huge splash of water, and an awful eerie moan, it sank to the depths of the dark, dark sea...!

But even though the Queen Berry sunk ten years ago, it's sometimes sighted even now. On stormy nights, that ship suddenly appears in the mist, with the people who should've died still on board. And they try to tempt the living into becoming sacrifices, so that they too may sink with the ship!

...Kazuya remembered.

The tables that looked as if they had people sitting there just moments before.

The warm plates of food.

The scattered playing cards.

The arrow that came flying at him when he touched the vase...

And the name of the ship itself—the name that Avril had mentioned, the *Queen Berry*, was definitely the same one written on the hull of this ship!

“What’s wrong, Kujou?”

“V-V-Victorique, please listen calmly to what I’m about to say. This ship that we’re on, basically, it’s ... now, don’t panic when I tell you.”

“What are you talking about?”

“And, and don’t laugh either. Because this is absolutely true. Promise me you won’t laugh.”

“Very well.”

“This is a ghost ship!”

“....”

Victorique’s mouth popped open, and with a completely straight face, she laughed, “Ha, ha, ha!”

Kazuya’s shoulders slumped dejectedly.

Victorique looked down at him curiously. “You’re an amusing fellow.”

“At least hear me out. I do have reason to think so.”

Kazuya took a deep breath, and began to retell Avril’s story to Victorique. This attracted the attention of the well-dressed man from before, who broke off from the group of men who were crowded in front of the door. As he keenly listened in on their conversation, his face started to twitch, and his expression gradually turned to one of terror.

But Victorique only stared at Kazuya, appalled. “A ghost ship? Kujou, don’t tell me you were actually being serious?”

“Well, I’m just saying, what if...”

“You’re referring to this ship?” Now Victorique started to mumble crossly, “I was sure you were joking, and I even laughed for you. For goodness’ sake, you are an odd man....”

Then she went to the bar counter, and came back carrying a bottle of wine and the glass that she had previously filled with the purple-red liquid. “Look carefully at this wine.”

“Why?”

“See how bright the color is, although the label on the bottle says that it’s an old vintage.”

“...What about it?”

Victorique pursed her lips irritably.

But then, all of a sudden...

The lights went out.

The lighting, until now so painfully bright, was extinguished, plunging the lounge into darkness. The men who were elbowing each other in their stampede toward the door fell into a panic and began to let out shouts of rage, along with shrieks of fear.

Surrounded by the disembodied voices in the darkness, Kazuya too was suddenly seized by a powerful dread. Despite his violently quivering legs, he reached out his hands to try to shield Victorique, who should have been standing nearby.

But there was no one there. He groped for her in the dark, calling out her name softly. His dread, and feelings of worry for Victorique, were growing rapidly out of control.

...But the blackout lasted for only an instant. The lights came back on without warning, and the room was once again bathed in

blinding light. Victorique was standing in the corner, and she glanced over at Kazuya, who was bent over, reaching his arms toward thin air. “What are you trying to do over there?” she asked, sounding surprised.

Kazuya hastily drew his arms back.

Now the lounge fell dead silent. The shouting men shut their mouths as if waking up in the middle of a dream, and bashfully hung their heads. Perhaps they had calmed down, or simply had not yet recovered from their shock, but regardless of the reason, no one dared make a sound.

Ned abruptly let out a shriek.

A roomful of startled eyes turned to him.

Ned was staring at the wall on the side of the bar counter. The woman in the red dress stood next to it, and stared back at him in surprise.

In a single exaggerated movement, likely perfected by years of performing on stage, Ned raised one hand and pointed at the wall. The woman, who had been leaning against the bar counter, slowly turned in the direction he was pointing.

And gasped.

Then she released a high-pitched, disconsolate wail, like a tearful howl.

The rest of the men reacted a moment later with cries of their own.

...There was something on the wall that had not been there a few seconds ago—large words written in what looked like blood.

The bloody words formed a message.

It read...

{Ten years have passed.
It feels like only yesterday.

This time, it's your turn.
The box has been prepared.
Now...

Run, my hares!}

The well-dressed man screamed.

This threw the heavy-set man beside him into a panic, and he shouted, "That invitation!"

"The garden box evening!"

"The main dish was hare!"

"We're not here to enjoy the running of the hares. We *are* the hares!"

Some of the eight men sank down to the floor, while some covered their faces, and others exploded into rage.

As Kazuya and the other young people looked on in bewilderment, the man who had read the mysterious words aloud screamed in terror, "The ghosts of those children came back, to turn us into sacrifices!"

"The message in blood is proof enough of that!"

The heavy-set man stood up and rushed to the door. He gripped the doorknob and turned it with all his might. Although the door had been locked earlier, for some reason it now opened easily.

Once the door flew open, the man took a step outside.

A dark streak flew inside from the hallway. To Kazuya, it looked like someone had painted a black line through the air with a thick paintbrush.

That line pierced between the man's brows and ran through his head, ending up sticking out slightly from the back of his skull. The tip of the black line was stained scarlet, as if inked over by a red pen.

But this was no line of ink. It was an arrow shot from a crossbow in the hallway.

The entire room watched the scene in shocked silence. No one moved an inch.

An arrow had effortlessly run through the man's head, as if penetrating through the softest of materials. The tip of the arrow poked out from the back of his head, smeared in blood and brain tissue. The man froze in place for a mere second, then fell flat on his back with a thud.

After that momentary stillness, the woman screamed, sounding like she was about to burst into tears. Then she nervously started to babble excuses. "I, I tried to open that door just a few minutes ago! But it wouldn't open! Trust me, it really wouldn't. But if I had been the one to open it, then...!"

Victorique narrowed her eyes and stared hard at the woman's fear-stricken face.

But the other seven men paid no attention at all to her words. After a moment of stunned silence, they all made a mad dash toward the hallway, all while uttering a series of strange exclamations.

"That door is secure! The trap has already been triggered!"

"Get to the deck!"

"Run! The ship is trying to kill us!"

They stepped over the corpse and fled through the hallway, then broke into a run down the stairs, elbowing each other in their panic to escape to the deck of the ship.

Victorique and the others left behind looked at one another.

Consternation and wariness strained Ned's face. "I guess ... we should escape too, then?"

Kazuya, Victorique, Ned, and the young woman cautiously crept into the elegantly decorated hallway. Lamps on either side of them

illuminated their way with flickering light. Their every footstep sank into the comfortably soft crimson carpet. After some time, they located the stairwell, and climbed up to the deck. Ned was the first one to emerge outside.

“It’s raining. Looks like a storm...” he murmured, sighing.

The cramped deck was located at the stern of the ship. Torrents of rain pounded down upon it, walling it in with the darkness of the sea and the claps of thunder that reverberated through the night sky. The deck was slippery with rain, making it easy to slip and fall if one were careless.

The black sky, absent of stars, was instead cloaked by a blanket of dark, oppressive clouds. Rough, murky waves swept over the surface of the sea, which was imbued with a foreboding darkness that seemed as though it could swallow up anyone who laid eyes on it. The breaking waves crashed with a deafening boom.

“It’s pouring down....” said the woman, scowling.

Ned looked back at her. “I suppose taking out the lifeboats is a bad idea, then...?”

“Of course it is. It would be suicide in this kind of weather. You’d sink in no time.”

The men turned around at the sound of her voice, and one shouted, “Then what should we do?!”

“Well...”

Ned yelled out from next to her, “I’ve got it! We can get to the bridge, and steer the ship back to shore!”

Once the men heard this, they took off in a hurry, but the soaked deck was too slick, and they slid and tripped across it. Each time one of them fell down, he let out a furious bellow.

They found the bridge, but the door was locked. Ned slammed his body against the wooden door and broke it down. He jumped inside, but soon came back out, his face grim.

“It’s not going to work.”

“Why not?!” the men shouted angrily.

Ned replied in an equally irate tone. “The rudder is broken. This ship isn’t going anywhere.”

“You lie!”

They pushed him aside and piled into the room. Ned was knocked off balance and nearly fell. Then the men came back out, muttering in chagrin, “It’s true. It is broken!”

“...That’s what I said.”

But they ignored him and simply stood on the deck, at a loss for what to do next.

By all appearances, the *Queen Berry* had been left aimlessly adrift in the middle of a storm. With no one navigating the ship, it merely floated in the water, its destination unknown.

The men began to loudly question Ned, since he seemed to be the one most knowledgeable about the ship. But Ned gave them a dismayed look. “What else can we do? I don’t know any more than you do. ...All right, I’ve thought of something. Why don’t we use the radio to call for help? The coast guard ought to come for us.”

“Then hurry up and do it! Don’t just stand there!” several men shouted.

Ned looked put out for a moment, but quickly recovered himself and pointed across the deck at the ship’s fore. “The radio room is at the bow of the ship. Let’s go!”

“Hurry up!”

Raindrops struck their skin with painful force.

The deck seemed to be around twenty meters wide. The bow was on the far side, and was completely invisible in the dark.

Ned ran ahead, but then stopped, and turned back.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s no use....”

Right behind him, the woman shouted, “That decorative smokestack is in the way. It’s too big, unnatural for the design of the ship. It means we can’t get to the other side....”

It melted into the darkness and was difficult to see, but in front of them was a huge, black smokestack. Their view of the bow was completely obscured, not because it was nighttime, but because that dark shape blocked their line of sight. This was the smokestack that Kazuya had noticed when he first boarded the ship.

It was a decorative smokestack of the kind often used in passenger ships that emphasized style over function. But it was so large that it threw the rest of the ship off balance, and partitioned off the front half of the deck from the back. It was also far too short and thick for a smokestack.

Kazuya and Ned ran to either side, only to confirm that there was no way to get past it. The path between bow and stern was completely cut off by that strange smokestack jutting out of the deck of the ship.

The young woman turned to the group of men. Heavy rain soaked her black hair, and her wet dress clung to her white skin. “We won’t be able to get there while we’re on the deck. We need to try going through the inside of the ship.”

“No!” shouted the men.

Then one added, his voice trembling, “If we go back inside, we’ll become hares! We can’t let that happen!”

“Hares?! What are you talking about?” the woman shouted back in exasperation.

Ned walked up beside her. “She’s right. We don’t have any idea what you old men have been talking about all this time, or what

those words written in blood mean, either. But all of you know what it means, don't you? If you do, then you should explain it to us! That's your responsibility! Uh, hey..."

The well-dressed man shouted, pointing to a lifeboat. The other men dragged the lifeboat and began to lower it down. But the waves were too rough, and the heavy rain savagely whipped it against the side of the ship. It was no situation to be launching a lifeboat.

Ned, the woman, and Kazuya tried frantically to stop them.

"If you leave the ship in this kind of weather, you'll capsize and die!" shouted Kazuya.

"Shut up!"

The men jumped onto the lifeboat one by one in their effort to escape, ignoring the cries of Ned and the others.

But the moment the well-dressed man was about to step in the boat, his expression suddenly turned anxious, and he looked back at the others still left on the ship.

The woman cried out to him, "It's dangerous! Come back!"

The well-dressed man's blood-shot eyes darted back and forth apprehensively. Several seconds of silence passed.

"...Fine." He looked at the raging sea, then the boat, and the faces of the remaining young people. The men in the boat paid no attention to him, not even bothering to look back. Hesitation and irritation welled up in his eyes as he watched them prepare to leave.

The lifeboat was lowered off the side of the ship, its six occupants heedless of the woman's relentless pleading. It fell onto the surface of the water.

Kazuya and the others leaned over the railing and watched it float.

But within moments, the lifeboat was jolted by a wave, and then an

enormous surge of water swept it onto its side, capsizing it.

Kazuya screamed, helpless but to watch the men disappear to the bottom of the sea.

They had no time to cry out as they were dragged underwater. Only white foam remained floating on top of the waves—but the boat itself was nowhere to be found.

It all happened in an instant.

Rain violently pounded the bodies of the people left behind on the deck.

Kazuya looked up at the faces of Ned and the woman standing beside him. Ned had gone stark white, and was trembling visibly. His lips were bloodless, and he had fallen mute.

And as for the woman...

As she looked down on the sinking boat, a peculiar smile of satisfaction appeared on her face. Her eyes were cold enough to send chills down Kazuya's spine.

The woman's red lips moved, whispering something. These were not words meant for anyone to hear. But their faint sound drifted to his ears.

"I told you. I even warned you."

The woman suddenly noticed Kazuya looking at her. This time she turned to him and muttered disdainfully, "Adults are always such fools. Full of ego, doing things that make no sense." She shrugged, and walked back to the staircase that led to the inside of the ship.

"Hey! It's not right to say something like that, not after what just happened!"

But Kazuya's voice didn't reach her. With a mixture of anger and alarm, he watched her slender form disappear below the deck.

four

[4]

The five survivors made their way back to the lounge, trudging down the hallway to the opened door. But just as the woman walking in front was about to step foot inside...

Her eyes opened wide. She slowly raised her hands to cover her mouth, a scream catching in her throat.

Kazuya, following closely behind, gave her a strange look. "What's wrong?"

The woman whimpered and closed her eyes. Then she screamed.

Ned rushed up from the end of the hallway, shouting, "What the hell's the matter!?"

The woman started to cry loudly. She lifted a thin, trembling arm and pointed inside the lounge. "This room, this room..."

"What?!"

"I can't take it anymore!"

Kazuya poked his head inside—and found himself speechless.

The lounge had completely changed from before. The walls, the ceiling, and the floor... In the space of just a few minutes, the entire lounge had been flooded to a spectacular degree. The bar counter, the tables, and the wine bottles were still in place, but looked as though they had spent years in a sunken ship at the bottom of the sea. The walls were rotting, stained with moisture, and muddy water dripped steadily from the ceiling.

The lamps burned dimly in the flooded lounge.

The woman began to weep hysterically. Ned stood at her side, grasping for the right words to calm her down. But to his dismay,

she only wept harder, crying out, "What happened here?! Somebody do something!"

Ned looked around the room in bewilderment. "How could the lounge end up like this? Those words are still on the wall, but...."

The same blood-stained words from before were scrawled on the wall, eerily illuminated in the pale lamplight. Ned walked past a rotting table and kicked it lightly, and it crumbled to pieces. The ruins were impregnated with the smell of seawater. The floor felt soft, as if it were disintegrating. An uncomfortable squishing sensation traveled up their legs with every step they took.

"Hey," Ned called out, turning around from his position in the center of the room. With a dumbfounded look, he slowly raised his hand to point at the floor next to the door, and stared at Kazuya and the others with an expression of entreaty in his eyes. Then he asked, in a trembling voice, "Hey... What happened to that body, of the man who was shot by the arrow?"

The woman abruptly stopped crying.

Kazuya surveyed the room, startled.

But the body had disappeared. There was nothing left of it inside the flooded lounge. The spattered blood and brain tissue had also vanished cleanly without any traces.

The woman started to wail, "There's something fishy about that man. He must have something to do with all of this! He locked us in here, and pretended to be dead to scare us, and now he's laughing at us. Hey, get in here! Where are you!?" She crossed the lounge, peeking under tables and calling out for him.

Ned snapped at her, "Calm down. He was definitely dead. I made sure of it, and that's the truth!"

"Does that mean you're in on it, too?!"

Ned scowled. "Just shut your mouth already!"

They glared at each other.

Then the well-dressed man who had chosen not to flee in the lifeboat stepped between them. “Stop fighting with each other; it’s pointless.”

“What do you mean, pointless?!”

“At any rate, let’s sit down. I’m tired....”

The five people exchanged looks.

Each person selected one of the relatively less soaked seats for themselves and sat down.

Ned tapped his foot nervously, unable to calm down from his agitation. Each time his foot moved, the floor made a squelching sound from the absorbed seawater. The young woman sat down heavily, holding her head in both hands, her face pale. Her glossy black hair spilled down over her lap. Meanwhile, the well-dressed man was unusually quiet. His face was stricken with fear, and his lips were tinged purple.

Only Victorique sat serenely and gracefully in her chair, looking the same way she always did. Kazuya turned his gaze to her, and with the sight of her face, started to feel his anxiety dissipating.

The five people introduced themselves one by one.

The well-dressed man spoke first. “I’m Maurice. I’m a senior diplomat with the Sauvure foreign affairs ministry.” He didn’t seem willing to elaborate any further.

The woman introduced herself next. “I’m Julie Guile. I ... have no occupation. My father owns a coal mine.” She apparently came from a rich family.

Maurice gave a snort.

“What’s your problem? So I don’t have to work to live. There’s nothing wrong with that,” Julie snapped back petulantly.

Ned Baxter, who had apparently struggled his way to the top as a stage actor, frowned slightly at her words.

Kazuya and Victorique introduced themselves. When Maurice heard Victorique's name, his demeanor suddenly shifted, as if he had heard that name somewhere before. But when it came to the other three people, his attitude was just as haughty as ever.

The five of them sat down, fatigued, and stared at each other.

The woman, Julie Guile, now seemed slightly calmer than before. "What on earth is going on here? Where are we? Why is this happening?" she whispered.

"I haven't the foggiest notion..." said Ned.

"I don't know, either," replied Kazuya.

Maurice kept silent and looked down at the floor. The other three spoke on, sharing their misgivings, but one by one, they began to direct their attention toward Maurice, who was being extremely quiet, and Victorique, who was observing him very closely.

A quiet tension filled the room. And when that tension reached its peak...

Victorique had been silent all this time, but now she suddenly opened her mouth. In her husky, but resonant voice, she said, "Maurice."

The man shuddered at the sound of his own name.

The others watched the two of them carefully.

Maurice stiffened, like a frog being stared down by a snake, as he awaited Victorique's next words.

She opened her mouth and spoke again. "You gave my friend a warning earlier when he was about to touch the vase."

"Y-yes..."

“How did you know it was a trap?”

Maurice bit his lip.

Julie and Ned gasped softly.

Silence descended upon the gloomy, flooded lounge.

The disquieting sound of dripping water echoed through the stillness.

When Maurice didn't respond, Victorique continued, “You seem to have known something that we—the four of us young people—didn't. The eight older men spoke of things that we didn't understand. From among them, you, Maurice, are the only survivor. Don't you owe an explanation to the young people on this ship?”

Maurice bit his lip ever more tightly.

There was no sound but the dripping of water.

At last, Maurice resignedly lifted his gaze, and muttered in a low voice, “Because it's the same.”

“What is?”

“As back then, ten years ago. That's how I knew.”

The face that he slowly raised up was as bloodless as a corpse. He parted his bruised lips, and said, “This ship is the *Queen Berry* that sank in the Mediterranean ten years ago. That means it's starting over again. That's how I knew.”

one

monologue 2

[1]

I awoke to the sensation of someone shaking me.

I opened my eyes, and saw a pair of black eyes peering at me worriedly. Her long black hair, the same glistening color as her eyes, draped down to the floor.

She was a pretty girl, around the same age as me.

I tried to get up, and let out a groan from the pain in my head. The girl murmured a little cry of concern, and propped me up with her thin hands.

Where was I?

What had happened to me?

I put a hand to my head, and looked around. I was in a spacious lounge. There were elegant antique-looking tables and chairs scattered here and there. In the corner was a bar counter, lined with many wine bottles. A small stage had been set up on the side of the room, with sheet music left open as if someone had been performing there.

There were a lot of other boys and girls my age lying down on the polished hardwood floor. There were at least ten of us there. All of the kids were gripping their heads, complaining about their headache.

I realized that the kids belonged to many different races. Nearly all of them had white skin. But since the group included everyone from a heavy-set, particularly Germanic-looking boy with blond hair and

blue eyes, to a tanned, curly-haired boy who looked like he grew up around the Mediterranean, I could tell that we came from many countries. There was also a short, yellow-skinned, Chinese-looking boy. A small boy and girl of similar swarthy complexions tried to communicate, but when they realized that they spoke different languages, they seemed taken aback.

Out of the roomful of groaning voices, probably complaining of their headaches, I could make out the sounds of English and French, but there were also many kids speaking rapidly in foreign languages, and I didn't know what they were saying.

The yellow-skinned boy came over and helped me up. I thanked him in French, "*Merci*," and he nodded as if he understood.

"Where are we?!" I heard someone say in clear-sounding English. The children all turned around to see who was yelling.

A white boy was standing there. He was skinny, and his hair was short. His skin, dotted with freckles, was ruddy and deeply tanned.

"Some adults in this weird carriage grabbed me and gave me a meal, and I fell asleep. When I woke up, I was here. And my head hurts.... What's going on here?"

I stood up and said the same thing had happened to me.

"Did that happen to everyone here...?" the boy replied uneasily.

Only the children who understood English nodded.

The freckled boy looked around the lounge. He paced around the room impatiently, then looked up at the door. He put his hand on the doorknob.

...It opened.

I followed him to the door and took a peek outside. There was a long corridor, lined with lamps that lit up the ornate wooden walls and dark red carpet with much brighter light than they needed.

The freckled boy looked back at us, tension straining his face.

“Say...” he asked, tilting his head doubtfully. “Doesn’t it feel like the ground is moving?”

“...You’re right.”

Now that he mentioned it, it did feel like the ground was slowly moving from side to side. The movement was steady, swaying every few seconds....

Where were we?

Why were we here?

Then a girl lifted her head up from her hands and cried out shrilly, “Is it an earthquake? An earthquake, that must be it!”

This sent the group into a frenzy. Some of the children quickly dove underneath the tables. Just as panic was about to overtake us, the Chinese boy who lent a hand to me earlier said, “That’s not it.”

He spoke in English. His pronunciation was flawless.

All eyes turned to him.

“This movement is no earthquake.”

“Why do you say that?” asked the freckled boy.

The Chinese boy answered in a calm voice, “Because we aren’t on land.”

“What?”

“This movement ... these are waves. We’re at sea. This room is probably a ship’s cabin. What I think is, we’re not in a building on land, but on a ship.”

The lounge fell deathly quiet.

two

[2]

The freckled boy led us and several other children who had recovered from their headaches down the hallway. The Chinese boy and the black-haired girl who had awakened me earlier came with us.

The hallway was brightly bathed in lamplight. Our feet sank into the crimson carpet, which felt plusher than any carpet I'd ever stepped on. The softness nearly made me lose my balance and fall down.

I muttered this aloud, and the Chinese boy replied, "Yeah. We must be on one of the upper levels of the ship."

"How do you know?"

"On this kind of ship, the upper levels are reserved for the first-class passengers. They can afford to pay through the nose to go on a luxury cruise, and that's why the lounge and the cabins, and even the hallways are so fancy."

"Oh..."

"But if you go to the lower levels, they cram the sailors and the second and third-class passengers into cheap rooms. So they skimp on the amount of lighting, and the carpets look worn out. Go even lower, and you'll find the cargo hold and the boiler rooms, which look so grimy, you can't even imagine you're on the same ship anymore."

"...You know an awful lot about this sort of thing," the freckled boy muttered in an accusatory tone.

The Chinese boy smiled wryly. "Come on, don't look at me like that. I just happen to have some experience being a third-class passenger."

“Huh...”

As we walked along, we introduced ourselves to each other. The freckled boy called himself Huey. The Chinese boy was named Yang. “What about you?” they asked me.

I answered, “Alex. Nice to meet you.”

“Are you French? It’s just that you spoke French at first, and you have a little bit of an accent to your English.”

“No, I’m from Sauvure.”

“Oh. So they speak French in that country, huh?”

The black-haired girl apparently didn’t understand either English or French, but she seemed to catch on that we were introducing ourselves, so she pointed at herself: “Ree.” And then she counted off her fingers to show us that she was fourteen years old.

Just as Yang had described, that luxury lounge seemed to be on one of the floors nearest to the top of the ship. Once we found a stairwell and climbed up, we immediately found the deck. We emerged onto the deck one by one. As each kid climbed up onto the wooden deck, which had clearly been in service for many years, the planks made a stiff creaking sound.

And once we were all outside ... we were lost for words.

All we saw was the ocean—the ocean, and the night...

We were shrouded by heavy darkness, unimaginable in the city. Black waves sloshed around the ship. The pale moon was far above us, its image reflected on the surface of the ocean as a single line of light. There was only water as far as the eye could see, and nothing else in sight except for the ship itself.

One boy ran across the deck. “He-ey!” he shouted. “Is anyone out there?! Help us!”

The quiet sound of waves came back as the only reply.

A Hungarian girl, tall and plump, also ran forward. She leaned over the railing, and just as she was about to give a yell of her own...

I heard something slice through the air—a strange whistling sound. Then came the girl's shrill scream.

Huey was startled. "What's wrong?"

"Something just grazed my cheek. Right after I walked over here, something flew at me and fell into the water...."

Huey reached out to touch the girl's face.

Even in the darkness, I could clearly see thick blood smeared on his hand.

A shallow gash ran across the girl's right cheek as if something had scraped it, drawing blood. When she realized what had happened, she screamed, and sank down to the floor.

I went to help the girl up. The black-haired girl, Ree, also lent a hand.

Huey and the others went to investigate in the direction where the Hungarian girl had pointed, but it was too dark to tell what could have caused something to fly through the air like that.

Yang had gone to the bridge before all this happened, but now he came back out, shaking his head. "It's no use. The rudder is broken. No... Someone broke it."

"How can that be? Why are we here? And are there any other people on this ship? Why are kids the only ones on board?" cried out one boy.

But Yang just shook his head in dismay. "I don't know."

Huey stood up. "At this rate, we're just going to end up stranded. Wait, how about finding the radio? This kind of ship should carry a radio, right?"

"Yeah. Hey, Alex... The radio room should be in the bow of the

ship, shouldn't it?" Yang asked me. But I had never been on a ship like this before, and I shook my head, unable to answer him.

"Let's go!" Yang and Huey ran off together. But soon enough, they came back, their shoulders slumped.

"What happened?"

"We can't make it.... There's this huge smokestack, and it's blocking the way. It's impossible to cross the deck from stern to bow. I guess the smokestack's probably for decoration.... But it's still much too big. Almost as if someone deliberately made it that way, just so we wouldn't be able to get to the radio room...."

"Then what should we do?"

Huey looked up at me. "There has to be a way. If not by the deck, then we could try going through the inside. We can go down the stairs, walk back through the hallway toward the bow, and go up the stairs on the other side. Once we're across, we can call the coast guard on the radio."

"Right. It shouldn't take long." Yang nodded.

Then I suddenly felt something soft lean against my arm. Ree had come to my side to cling to me anxiously. We couldn't communicate with words, but I tried to nod at her reassuringly, to let her know we were going to be okay.

We both propped up the Hungarian girl, who had blood running from her cheek, and went back down the stairs. The hallway was still bathed in that painfully bright light. The soft red carpet now felt a little different from before; now it looked more like the lurid red color of blood. The Hungarian girl at my side started to cry silently. I exchanged a look with Ree, and tightened my grip on the girl's arm.

We got back to the lounge, and found that the other kids seemed to have recovered from their headaches. When they caught sight of the injured girl, they were shocked into silence.

Everyone had been sitting in the chairs, staring down at the floor pensively. Their pale faces were lit up by the blazing light of the chandelier, and their eyes wore a dark look.

Several of them stood up. "What the... Wh-what happened?" they said, approaching us.

Huey pushed them back, saying, "Here's the situation." He took on the role of representative and explained what happened on the deck, then suggested to them that we all head to the radio room in the bow. The others nodded, lacking the strength to resist.

We started out by giving each other a simple self-introduction: our names, ages, nationalities, and how we ended up on this ship. There was one thing about us that differed every time: what country we came from. These included England, France, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Italy, America, Turkey, Arabia, China, and ... Sauvure.

There were several other kids besides Ree that we couldn't communicate with, but apparently, among the eleven boys and girls assembled here, no two came from the same country. We had been brought together from all over the world.

But we did have something in common.

We were all orphans. If we disappeared, no one would come look for us.

three

[3]

All eleven of us walked down the hallway again, but this time in the other direction.

I was feeling so tense that my headache came back. I put a hand to my head as a low groan escaped my throat.

Ree noticed me and paused. “Alex...” she whispered, pointing at the heart-shaped pendant hanging from her neck—a shiny pink pendant made of enamel. She grabbed my hand and made me touch it, then closed her eyes. Maybe this was her way of telling me to relax.

Ree apparently treated that heart-shaped pendant as her amulet. She seemed to be trying to let me know that as long she had it, we would be safe. I saw a gentle radiance well up in her large black eyes. *She’s a kind girl*, I thought to myself. I nodded in thanks, and then we quickened our steps to catch up with the others.

Huey and Yang, walking in front, suddenly gave a shout. Everyone halted in surprise.

“It’s blocked off,” murmured Huey.

“What do you mean?!” cried out the Hungarian girl with the wounded cheek. She pushed through to the front, and the rest of us fell to either side to let her pass. I was walking at the very back, but through the newly formed gap in the crowd, now even I could clearly see what stood before us.

It was a wall.

The hallway was blocked off by a black wall that reached to the ceiling, and there was no way to bypass it. When Yang saw it, he turned around, his face pale, and ran back down the hallway.

“Yang?!” I yelled.

He looked back at me. "This shouldn't be the only hallway on this floor. We need to find out if there's another one that leads us to the bow!"

Everyone nodded, and ran after him.

But all of the hallways were cut off by the same black wall. The Hungarian girl was the first to reach the next one, and she burst into sobs, which prompted some of the other children to also start crying.

Huey and Yang conferred together in low tones, then looked up at us. "Let's go look for an elevator!"

The rest of us turned our gaze to them.

Huey declared reassuringly, "We can try the lower levels; they might not be blocked off. Agreed? OK, let's go!"

Yang pointed at the other end of the hallway. "We'll go that way."

The two of them took off, leading the way without bothering to wait for any dissenters.

The elevator was located in a corner even more brightly lit than the rest of the hallway. The metal cage gleamed eerily black. Next to it was a stairwell lined with sparkling white tile, but the lights inside were turned off for some reason, plunging it into a darkness that made for a stark contrast with the surrounding area.

Huey eyed the group of children. "There's a staircase, too. What do you think we should do?"

We all turned to look at each other.

Maybe we were just scared of taking the dark stairwell, but everyone suddenly started scrambling to get inside the elevator. For a moment, Huey stared open-mouthed at the elevator, filled to bursting with children, then seemed to compose himself. "There's room for two more.... Yang, Alex, can you two guide them one floor down?"

“What about you, Huey?” I asked him.

He tugged Ree’s hand in the direction of the stairwell, and answered, “Me and Ree will take the staircase. See you down below.”

Ree looked back at me, and waved her hand at me enthusiastically—she looked cute when she did that. I locked eyes with Yang, then ran to get inside the elevator.

The metal latticed doors closed after us with a coarse clank.

The elevator began its slow descent, groaning all the way.

We stayed silent, suffused with anxiety. The elevator’s lights shone starkly upon our faces.

But all of a sudden...

A girl screamed. It was Ree’s voice.

Yang frantically tried to pull open the latticed doors. The elevator stopped on the next floor down, with a few seconds of shaking and creaking. Then the doors slowly opened, and we all came tumbling out.

“Ree?!”

“What’s wrong, Huey!?”

I took a step into the dark stairwell, but it was immersed in an almost palpable darkness, and I hesitated, finding myself unable to do more than call out for them. From above, I heard the muffled sound of someone weeping.

“...Ree?!”

I was just about to run up the stairs when Yang came after me, carrying a small emergency flashlight that he had found in the elevator. He flipped the switch, and lit up the darkness of the staircase with a faint white circle of light—which then fell upon a corpse.

We uttered a low cry, going rigid in shock.

...Huey was lying there on the floor. His body was sprawled over the landing of the staircase like a broken marionette. He was lying face down, and his left hand was hidden underneath his body, with his right hand held to his waist.

Ree was slumped down next to him, as if her legs had given out.

“What happened?!” the German boy shouted at Ree. He was a heavyset boy of intimidating size, and looked far older than the fourteen years that he claimed was his real age.

But no matter how much he shouted, Ree was unable to give any explanation. She tried to explain via gesturing that she had followed Huey down the stairs, but then he collapsed here.

The German boy yelled at her angrily in accented English, “I don’t understand what you’re trying to say!”

I ran up to Huey and tried to check his pulse by taking his right hand, which was facing outward, and putting a finger on the inside of his wrist.

...But his pulse had completely stopped.

“How did he die?!” someone yelled. Ree shook her head, trying to tell us that she didn’t know.

Yang’s flashlight was the only illumination in the pitch black stairwell. But his shock overwhelmed him, and he dropped it. The round ray of light tumbled down the stairs, the rolling sound echoing, echoing... and then the staircase fell once again into darkness.

The silence that followed felt as heavy as death.

Then someone suddenly uttered a shrill scream. “No! I can’t take it anymore! I’m going back!”

The voice belonged to the Hungarian girl with the wounded cheek. The next thing I heard was the sound of her running down the

stairs. I started to rush after her, but Yang gasped, and yelled at us, “Hey, where are you going?! Don’t get lost!”

She didn’t answer. Yang yelled with even more urgency, “We have to stay together.... It’s too dangerous out there!”

I reached the floor below. I looked around, and caught a glimpse of the girl running away in terror. She turned the corner, and disappeared from view.

“Hey!” shouted the other children who followed on my heels. They exchanged a look between themselves.

There was no way we could just leave her by herself. We decided to rendezvous at the elevator, and started down the stairs, looking for her.

four

[4]

The hallway was feeling a little dark. We had descended by just one floor, but compared to the previous hallway, the lighting had gotten a bit dimmer, and I could see more knotholes in the wood. The crimson carpet was frizzy and darkened in the middle where people had trod upon it over and over, wearing it down.

The rooms for single occupants seemed to stretch on forever. The hallway remained unchanged, tricking the eye into thinking that we had only been passing the same point again and again.

As I walked upon the uncomfortably soft carpet, my feelings of apprehension kept growing stronger.

Maybe it would be better to say that I felt like something bad was going to happen.

My heart pounded in my chest.

When I approached the next corner, for some reason I didn't want to see what was around it. My legs refused to budge. I gathered up my gumption, and forced myself to walk around the corner ever so slowly.

And there I saw...

The Hungarian girl we had been looking for, standing there, all by herself. Her eyes were wide open, like something had startled her, and her body was perfectly still. I met her eyes. I wanted to look away, but I couldn't.

...She was dead.

Before I knew it, my mouth dropped open, and I screamed so loud that I couldn't believe that it came from my own throat.

She wasn't actually standing up; a combat knife had pierced her throat, skewering her to the wall. Feeling compelled to do something, I staggered toward her, reaching out my hand.

The second I touched her with my shaking hand, the knife that was embedded into the wall came loose, and her lifeless form collapsed into my arms.

She was heavy. I could acutely feel the sensation of her body weighing down on me.

After hearing my cry, the rest of the children gradually arrived. When they rounded the corner and saw the corpse, they screamed.

Yang approached me hesitantly. "Alex... Are you okay?"

I nodded listlessly.

The assembled children looked at one another, unable to do anything except tremble in fear. Finally, the bulky German boy yelled out, unable to contain his anger, "Who killed her?"

"Well ... I don't know," Yang replied.

The German boy shouted indignantly, "What do you mean, you don't know?!"

"It's just that none of us was carrying a knife. We all arrived on this ship empty-handed. And it's not like a passenger ship would have such a crude military knife on board."

"Then...?"

Everyone exchanged looks.

Ree arrived a few moments later. When she caught sight of the corpse, she gasped, and covered her mouth with her hands.

As I held that girl's body in that quiet hallway, I couldn't speak a word to anyone.

I saw an antique cabinet at the end of the hallway. One of the drawers was slightly ajar. From where I was standing, I could catch a glimpse of its contents.

There was a small pistol inside of the drawer. The barrel gleamed malevolently black.

There were weapons here.

Left on board this ship.

But...

...Why?

one

chapter three — the ghost ship Queen Berry

[1]

An oppressive air settled upon the flooded lounge. Only Victorique remained coolly detached, while the other four people would drop their eyes down, then look up to glare at each other, over and over again.

Cloudy drops of water dripped down to the floor from the walls and ceiling, which were soaked with seawater. Dampness permeated the entire lounge.

“...This ship once had eleven boys and girls on board. They were the ‘hares’,” began Maurice, groaning and shivering, hugging his knees like a child.

The other four shared a look.

Then Julie Guile jumped out of her seat and stood in front of Maurice. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hey... What happened to them?” asked Ned Baxter in a low voice.

“...They died. They killed each other.”

“Wh-why?!”

“That was part of the plan,” murmured Maurice. He looked up fearfully. The same blood-soaked message from before sprawled ghoulishly across the wall of the lounge. As Maurice looked up at those words, panic and despair flickered in his eyes. He parted his bloodless lips, and said, “I can’t tell you any more than that, or else I would be committing a breach of my official duties. But ... at any rate, at the end of that fateful night on this ship, the Queen Berry, we recovered the children’s bodies and disposed of them into the sea. Immediately after we finished our retrieval operations and left

the scene, the coast guard arrived to secure the ship, but of course it was already empty. Since there were still some traps left on board that hadn't been triggered yet, along with evidence that there had been fighting, the coast guard tried to conduct a search, but the ship was already sinking, and they were forced to evacuate. A-as for your story..."

Maurice pointed at Kazuya. "That ghost story you mentioned hearing from your classmate was based on this incident from ten years ago. When I heard you mention how the Queen Berry has been reappearing in the sea, trying to lure people on board, I was positive...." his somber voice grew strained, "...that this ship is a ghost ship!"

Ned and Julie exchanged an incredulous look, their faces stiffening anxiously. Ned grabbed a tennis ball and threw it into the air. He caught the falling ball, then threw it again. As for Julie, she got up and began to pace back and forth across the lounge.

Maurice continued, his shoulders beginning to tremble slightly. "This is a ghost ship, raised up from the bottom of the sea by the grudges of those dead children. And now, ten years later... They've brought together the adults who sent them to their deaths, in order for them to die here...." His face turned waxen. "And we too shall die...."

As his trembling spread over his entire body, and a wretched look twisted his features, he exclaimed, "You're only kidding yourself if you think we can make it to the radio room! We've been cursed by those children—by those hares!"

Someone burst out laughing.

Maurice shot Kazuya a glare. But Kazuya quickly shook his head, and turned to Victorique sitting beside him. She was looking down at the floor, her face hidden by her long blond hair, like spun golden thread.

Her thin shoulders were shaking convulsively.

"...Uh, Victorique?"

“Hoo-hoo-hoo!”

Kazuya reached out to brush away Victorique’s hair, and tell her to stop making such weird noises, but then he saw tears streaming down her face ... tears of laughter.

“Bwa-ha-ha!”

“Hey! What’s so funny!?”

The others stopped what they were doing—Ned playing with his tennis ball, Julie wandering around the room—and turned to stare in surprise at Victorique, who was in the middle of a laughing fit.

With graceful movements, Victorique pulled a pipe from her bag, lit the fire, and took a puff from it, uncaring of the adults gaping open-mouthed at her. She slowly blew out a mouthful of smoke directly into Maurice’s face. He broke into paroxysms of coughing, and had to wipe away tears from the corners of his eyes with his fingertips for several moments.

After spending a minute smoking her pipe, Victorique finally put her unoccupied hand into one of her lacy pockets. Her small hand emerged from the pocket grasping an envelope. Kazuya recognized it as the invitation that Victorique had discovered on Roxane’s yacht.

Ned caught sight of it. “Oh, I received one of those, too.”

“So did I,” said Julie. “I found it in my locked car.”

“Let me ask you one thing, Maurice.” Victorique faced the diplomatic official, who was more than three times her age, and addressed him with a smile. “What do you think? Do ghosts write invitations?”

Maurice gulped.

Kazuya and the others snapped back to reality. They locked eyes with one another, blinking as if they had awakened from a dream.

Maurice opened his mouth for a rebuttal, then shook his head

dispiritedly. "But ... still ... Be that as it may, it's still strange. There's no doubt that this ship sank. And then there's the message in blood on that wall. The lights were out for no more than ten seconds! Given that short of a time, it's impossible for a human to write such a long message in such large letters. And what about this lounge? It's completely different from before!"

Tears collected in his clouded eyes. Boiling over in frustration, he shouted, "Then you explain it! If not ghosts, then who else could've done it?!"

"Why, humans, of course," murmured Victorique in a quiet voice, her laughter finally ceasing.

Ned apprehensively squeezed his tennis ball.

Julie fingered the heart-shaped pendant hanging from her neck, which seemed to be another one of her habits, and continued to pace around the room. She took five steps, then turned. Then she took another five steps. Her movements were absentminded, and yet precise. Victorique glanced at her, and frowned slightly.

The pendant was enamel and in the shape of a heart. It looked old, and the paint was chipped in places. The design seemed rather childish, and didn't match Julie's crimson-colored dress, but she caressed that pendant with her fingertips as if it were very precious to her.

"These are all things that humans can do. Think about it," said Victorique.

"What? What are you talking about?" Maurice thrust his face into hers, boxing her in.

Victorique twisted her body away from him in distaste. She turned to Kazuya and commanded him irritably, "Kujou, you explain."

"Huh? About what?"

"The reconstruction of chaos."

"...You're asking me?!"

Her clear green eyes bore into Kazuya's own. He lasted only three seconds before giving into the power of her gaze, and answered, rattled, "Um, let's see, so Victorique takes a number of fragments, that is, of chaos, or in other words, the mysteries of this world, and puts them all in a saucepot and boils them up, yes, just like a stew. Next, she puts it in a bowl, and then, basically, that's the reconstruction. And once the mystery is neatly wrapped up, the inspector takes the credit for himself.... Wait, what was I talking about again?"

"Enough, you half-witted savant."

"Vi...!?"

Victorique ignored Kazuya, who was mumbling to himself that if he were really a half-wit, then he wouldn't have been able to study abroad in the first place, and launched into her explanation. "First of all, ghosts do not write invitations. You all know this, correct?"

Ned was the first one to nod, then Julie, and finally Maurice grudgingly gave a nod of his own.

Victorique waved the invitation in the air. "That means somebody wrote this to bring us together here on this ship."

"But this ship sank a long time ago!"

"How do you know this is the same Queen Berry that sank ten years ago?" asked Victorique quietly.

Maurice opened his mouth, about to speak, but then closed it without saying anything.

Victorique continued. "Allow me to propose a hypothesis here."

Everyone held their breath, watching this little girl speak with such authority.

In a soft voice, Victorique declared, "That someone familiar with the events of the past constructed a ship exactly like that one."

The lounge fell dead silent.

Ned and Maurice shared a wordless look. Kazuya was dumbfounded.

The sound of dripping water echoed in the flooded lounge.

At last, Julie collected herself, and timidly asked, "What do you mean by that?"

Victorique turned to Julie in her usual confident manner, and in her low, husky voice, began to explain. "My reasoning for this is exceedingly simple and logical. First, the Queen Berry apparently sank ten years ago. If that is true, then the ship we are currently on is a well-crafted replica."

"Huh?"

"If you think of it this way, then everything makes sense. We can also explain the seemingly supernatural events that have occurred. How about that?"

Julie knitted her brows, and thought for a moment. Then she responded, her tone uncertain, "So, then...?"

Victorique rolled her eyes in annoyance. With her pipe still in her mouth, she wearily said, "Try using your nose a bit."

Kazuya and the others scrunched up their noses, taking a sniff of their surroundings. But the lingering scent of smoke from Victorique's pipe was getting in the way, and Kazuya found it hard to tell what he was supposed to be smelling.

Victorique went on. "Don't you smell fresh paint?"

"Oh!" Kazuya recalled the odor that he had encountered earlier, something smelling like paint thinner that had filled the entire lounge. He had the feeling that this was one reason why his headache had been so awful, and not simply because of the sedatives....

"And then there's the wine that I was looking at before. Do you

remember, Kujou?”

Kazuya did remember, now that she mentioned it. Victorique had looked appalled when he blurted out that they were on a ghost ship, and she tried to show him a wine bottle and a glass that she had poured. But then the lights went out that very moment, and with all the commotion, he had completely forgotten what she had been talking about....

“A bottle of that same wine should be on the bar counter of this lounge, too.” Victorique pointed to the bar, and the others turned to look at it. A row of wine bottles were lined up closely together on top. “The wine that I uncorked and poured into the glass has gone back inside the bottle. Don’t you find it strange?”

Kazuya made a murmur of surprise. The bottle that Victorique had uncorked and the glass filled with wine were clearly nowhere in sight. He walked over to the counter to investigate, and found a bottle affixed with the same label, but this time it was still corked.

Victorique beckoned Kazuya to hand her the bottle. “This wine was manufactured in a Sauvure winery in 1890, over thirty years ago. The culprit must have included this wine in order to faithfully reproduce the state of the real Queen Berry ten years ago. However...”

She shrugged, then uncorked the bottle and dribbled it into a dirty glass within reach. The same bright purplish-red liquid as before flowed out of the bottle. “The contents are fake. Once I pour it, I can see that it has the characteristic brightness of fresh wine. Aged wine should have a muddier color. And as for the scent...” Victorique lifted the glass to her nose. “See.... It even smells like new wine.”

“What does this mean?” asked Kazuya.

Victorique pointed at the label. “This winery burnt to the ground when war broke out in the summer of 1914. It’s impossible to get ahold of it now. So someone must have just reproduced the label to cover up the original one on this new bottle of wine.”

The four looked at one another, their faces uneasy.

“...E-even so!” shouted Maurice. “What about the message in blood on this wall? And this flooded lounge?! What happened to the body?!”

“You don’t have to shout, Maurice.” Victorique grimaced, rising from her chair. She walked to the door with tiny steps and opened it. “This room is most likely not the same one we were in at the start.”

Maurice was shocked into silence.

“We came out to the deck of the ship, and when we returned, we passed through the same hallway and entered this room without a second thought, but why is that?”

Julie ventured a hesitant murmur. “But this door was open, and the other ones were shut....”

“Right. Now... Come, Kujou.”

Kazuya stood up. Victorique walked into the hallway, and signaled to him with her finger. “Open all of the doors on this side, starting with this one.”

“Okay...” Kazuya opened the door next to the lounge’s entrance. It opened to a luxurious first-class cabin. Chandeliers hung down from the ceiling, overlooking the large canopy bed and the cozy sofa. Even the tablecloth and the closet were made of the finest materials.

Then he opened the door next to that room. He found exactly the same type of room.

Kazuya opened several more doors only to find more cabins. Fast losing patience with this exercise, he walked back toward the lounge. This time he opened the door on the other side of the entrance.

An unexpected scene unfolded before Kazuya, and he gasped. He turned to Victorique, speechless. She nodded with a knowing grunt,

and waved over the remaining three people.

They all peered into the neighboring room.

...There they found exactly the same lounge as before, as if they were staring at a photograph. The tables, bar counter, the small stage, and...

The bloody message on the wall.

The opened bottle, and the glass filled with wine.

And the corpse of the heavy-set man on the floor, an arrow piercing his brow.

Julie and Maurice cried out in astonishment. They turned to Victorique, and she nodded in satisfaction. "This is the room we were originally in. I still don't know who closed this door and opened the other one, but as you can see, it's a very simple trick."

two

[2]

The five survivors re-entered the original lounge, where a man lay dead on the floor. Compared to the other room, the chandeliers here shone with an unnatural brightness that made them feel even more on edge. They each found a seat for themselves and sat down, keeping an eye on each other.

Victorique stared up at the wall emblazoned with the message in blood. Her eyes were sharp, almost glaring in intensity. Finally, she pointed at the bar counter beside the wall. “Kujou, go look in there.”

“Huh...?”

“I have reconstructed the chaos and arrived at an answer. This time you should find something there that you didn’t see before.”

This puzzled Kazuya, but he still rose from his seat and went behind the counter to look inside as she had asked. There on the floor he caught sight of something crumpled up into a ball, as if someone was trying to hide it. It looked like a large blanket.... No, more like...

“Wallpaper!” Kazuya shouted in surprise.

Hearing his shout, Julie and Ned both got up and headed to the bar counter to look inside.

“Oh!”

“Is this...?”

A crumpled sheet of wallpaper, printed with the same design that was on the wall, had been wadded up and crammed underneath the counter.

Maurice arrived a moment later. “Is, is this ... wallpaper?!”

“Yes,” said Victorique, nodding calmly. “Think, Maurice. It certainly is impossible to write such a long message on the wall in only ten seconds. But ten seconds is enough time to tear off wallpaper that’s hiding a message already written in advance, isn’t it?”

Ned exhaled in understanding. “I get it now.”

Standing next to him, Julie nodded, fingering her heart-shaped pendant, her long black hair swaying from side to side. “Well, what do you know. It’s simple once you think about it.”

Ned once again began to play with his tennis ball, while Julie restarted her five-step turns, both clearly unable to calm themselves.

But Maurice only glowered at them, his shoulders shaking. He stood in the middle of the floor and looked over each of the other four people one by one, until he finally yelled out, “Listen here, you fools!”

Victorique frowned. “What was that for?”

Maurice retreated against the wall while fearfully examining the faces of Kazuya, Ned, Julie, and finally, Victorique. And then he asked in a trembling voice directed at no one in particular, “Then who is the *hare*?”

The other four people stared back at him in confusion. “What do you mean, ‘the hare’?”

“Another name for those children. We called them hares!” Shuddering uncontrollably, he turned his back to the bloody message scrawled on the wall, and shouted, “Isn’t that what’s going on? If this isn’t a ghost ship, and it isn’t cursed, then what else could it be!?”

Everyone looked at each other. Suddenly, Julie cried out in shock, and put her hand to her mouth. “What if ... this is all part of someone’s revenge?” she whispered softly, sounding incredulous.

“Oh, that’s it!” exclaimed Ned.

Maurice’s entire body shook. “Don’t play innocent! Then who sent that invitation?! You sent it to all of the men who were involved in that incident, including me. Now they’re all dead, and I’m the only one left. But then there’s you four young people.... Where did you come from? You weren’t with us ten years ago. So why did you receive an invitation?”

With his shoulders heaving with ragged breaths, he continued, “Not all of the hares died. Some of them survived and were released. We were told to fatten them up, and so we ensured that they would live in luxury afterwards. ...So there’s a surviving hare among you, isn’t there? And now, ten years later...”

Julie vigorously fidgeted with her pendant, while Ned squeezed his tennis ball.

“You constructed a replica of that ship, and invited us here to take your revenge!”

“No...”

“I have nothing to do with this!”

The two young adults shared a baffled look.

“Then how did you get an invitation?!” shouted Maurice.

Kazuya was the first to respond, and timidly explained his and Victorique’s circumstances: that they were classmates at school, and had actually intended to spend the weekend on a yacht, but something suddenly came up and they had to change their plans. While they were bored and had nothing else to do, they discovered the invitation on board the yacht....

When he mentioned that the owner of the yacht was a famous fortune-teller named Roxane, and that she had been murdered, Maurice’s face went stark white.

“Lady Roxane ... was murdered?!”

“Did you know her?”

But Maurice didn't answer Kazuya's question.

Ned spoke up next. “I was originally an orphan, with no living relatives. I grew up in an orphanage until I was eighteen. After that, I went to work, and on the side, I trained to become an actor. I was lucky enough to find some roles on stage, and before I knew it, I had gained a bit of fame. And then, last weekend...”

He cut himself off. Then his pace of speaking slowed, as if he were unsure of how to choose his words. “After my performance, I went to my dressing room, and found that someone had delivered a bouquet and an invitation. Well, this happens sometimes, thanks to some of my more ardent fans.... I had just wrapped up a production, and I was feeling like a break, so I decided to come along.” Ned finished speaking, and cast his eyes down to the floor.

Then Julie explained her own situation. “I mentioned this earlier, but my father is wealthy and owns a coal mine. So I grew up doing whatever I wanted. I was raised in the lap of luxury in a huge mansion, and my family indulged my every whim....”

Unlike Ned, Julie spoke hurriedly. Just when it seemed like she was running out of things to say, she added more to her story. “It happened just recently. For some reason, I found this invitation inside my private car, even though it was locked. I did think it strange at the time.... But my birthday was coming up, and I assumed it was just another one of my friends' pranks. So I came here, laughing to myself in anticipation. Huh... I couldn't have been more wrong....”

With that, everyone was finished with their stories.

Maurice sat, slumped over in thought. His face was stern, wrinkles gathering between his brows. Then he looked up, and pointed at Ned and Julie. “It's one of you. ...Isn't it?”

“Wh-what are you talking about! No!” shouted Julie.

Maurice glanced at Victorique. “I know this girl's background very

well. She comes from a noble family. She wouldn't do something like this. The same goes for her friend. And they're too young. Ten years ago, they both would've been just five years old. There weren't any hares that small. They were all in their early to mid-teens."

"How can you be so sure? All you know about her background is what she said herself! She could be some brat from the streets as far as you know!"

"Nonsense. I can immediately recognize those born into the aristocracy. They have a different presence from that of the commoners. An upstart like you wouldn't understand, but I myself hold the title of a viscount, and I have years of experience mingling with the most elite members of society. I know enough to say for certain that this child is of noble birth."

"What?! Did you just call me an upstart?!"

Julie lunged at him, but Ned held her back, yelling, "Stop it!"

Maurice gave them both a scornful look. "The hares were orphans. It's obvious enough when someone comes from the lower classes. So here we have an actor, and a rich man's daughter. Either one of you could be what's left of those children who escaped death.... Ha!" He faced the ceiling and burst out laughing.

Julie struggled violently, like a wild animal, trying to propel herself at Maurice. Ned shouted for Kazuya to lend him a hand. Kazuya rushed over to help pin her down.

Julie raised her voice in a guttural, bestial growl. "Maurice, you're the suspicious one here!"

"...Excuse me?"

Julie finally stopped struggling, and Ned and Kazuya released her. She glared at Maurice with dangerous eyes, like a wounded animal driven to desperation. He backed against the wall, returning her gaze skittishly.

"Those hares may have had parents, or maybe adults who

considered themselves parents. Adults who cared for them. Not unlikely, is it?"

"...."

"Ten years ago, Maurice, you would have been in your mid-thirties. If you had your children in your twenties, then they would have been almost teenagers at the time. Around the age of the hares, as you said."

"My daughter attends an exclusive school for children of noble families."

"Oh, you may claim that you're a nobleman, that you're from the ministry of foreign affairs, but all we have is your word. As long as we're on board this ship, there's no way to prove anything you say. You could be some deranged parent who constructed this ridiculous ship to take revenge for your dead child. Yes, you must be a father who went insane after the death of his child!"

"That's absurd!" Maurice laughed contemptuously, then scowled at Julie. "I won't allow you to insult me in such a manner!"

As soon as Kazuya saw the expression on his face, he was dead certain: Maurice was unquestionably an aristocrat. It was an expression deeply ingrained with a certain prideful, detached attitude that was peculiar to the aristocracy, something which Kazuya had become thoroughly sick of since he came to this country. There was no way this man could be misrepresenting himself.

"That's right," Julie continued. "It's just like this little detective girl said at the beginning. I was standing nearby and happened to hear her say that there was one more person than there should've been. There were eleven of us when we were in the dining room, and when we woke up in the lounge, there was one more. Twelve people. The one who wasn't in the dining room is the person behind all this. He slipped in among us, and now he's laughing inside while he watches us get frightened and die."

"What!?"

“Now, I know that this actor fellow was definitely in the dining room. It was dark and I couldn’t see his face clearly, but I could hear him going on and on with his boring anecdotes about his acting career.”

Ned’s cheeks turned red with embarrassment.

Julie bit her lip, and glared at Maurice.

“...And yet, my dear little rich girl. *You* weren’t there, were you?”

“Yes, I was!”

“There’s no proof of it.”

“The same goes for you. No one saw your face. That means the culprit is either you or me.”

“Hmph!”

The two of them glared at each other.

Then Julie said, in a voice trembling with anger, “Another thing, Maurice. Why didn’t you get in the lifeboat?”

“W-well...”

“Your colleagues couldn’t wait to get in that boat. I remember now; weren’t you the one who first suggested escaping in a lifeboat? But by the time they lowered it into the water, you were the only one not on board.”

“Th-that’s because... the rest of you were saying it was dangerous.”

“Are you saying you seriously listened to the words of a mere upstart like me? A nobleman like you?” snapped Julie sarcastically.

This time Maurice tightened his hand into a fist and charged at Julie. Ned hurried to step in the way.

Julie resentfully locked eyes with Maurice, her breathing rough. Then, suddenly, her shoulders twitched. “Shh!” she hissed, holding

her index finger up to her lips as she silently strained to hear something.

“What’s wrong?” Ned whispered.

“I hear something....” Julie’s face stiffened in fear. “I hear water!” She flung open the door and ran into the hallway. Then she stopped, and listened again.

The faint sound of splashing water echoed from below. Everyone froze in confusion.

Maurice moaned, “We’re sinking!” and fell to his knees in despair.

Ned shook him by the shoulders. “What are you saying, old man?!”

He didn’t respond. Ned grasped his shoulders and shook him forcefully.

Maurice opened his tightly-shut eyes. His face was taut with horror. In a low voice, he said, “If you open ... a small hole in the bottom of the ship, the hull will fill with water, bit by bit.... This is how ... you can set a time limit.”

“Huh...?”

“That was... that was... my idea.”

“What?!”

Maurice was silent for a moment, his shoulders quivering. Then he looked up, and gave a bloodcurdling scream. “To the radio room, hurry! The ship is sinking!”

one

monologue three

[1]

A loud voice rang out. “If you’re looking for weapons, here they are!”

The children stood very still under the blazing lamplight of the hallway. I stood there in their midst, clutching the body of the Hungarian girl, her throat pierced with the combat knife. For several seconds, no one moved a muscle, nor did anyone say a word.

There were nine boys and girls left. Huey and the Hungarian girl were no longer with us.

The shout had come from the German boy. His heavy-set frame, nearly large enough to be an adult, although he was only fourteen years old, quivered with anger. He grabbed Ree, who had been the last one to arrive, and yanked forward the hand she was hiding behind her back.

I immediately yelled, “Stop it!”

His deep and commanding German-accented voice thundered through the hallway. “Look at her. Here’s your murder weapon! She was carrying it with her!”

When we all saw what he was pointing at, we gasped.

For some reason, Ree was gripping a small knife in her hand. It was long and smooth like an elephant’s tusk, and it gleamed coldly under the lamplight.

“It’s her. She’s the killer!” the boy spat out venomously.

Ree struggled to free herself, which shook loose the knife from her

small hand. The German boy bent down and retrieved it, while keeping a tight grip on her.

Ree shook her head, trying to tell us that she didn't do it. Tears filled her eyes.

Yang stepped forward. "Stop it!" he shouted.

"I don't take orders from yellow bastards like you!"

"What!?" Yang sputtered in anger.

Another boy quickly stepped in between them. This boy, a tall and muscular Austrian, had been together with the German boy since the beginning, and looked and acted similar to him. He joined the German boy and grabbed Ree's other wrist. "If we get rid of her, we won't be in danger anymore. Look at her; she's the only one hiding a weapon. Damn it, I'll bet she's just pretending not to understand what we're saying!"

"You're wrong. She really doesn't understand!" I yelled.

But they didn't even bother to look in my direction. Now that they had Ree pinned between them, unable to move, the German boy punched her in the head as hard as he could. Ree's small head bobbed, her long black hair fluttering into the air.

Yang frantically tried to pull him away from her. The other kids just stood there petrified, watching what was unfolding.

"Yeah! And she was the only one with Huey when he died. This bitch locked us up in here, and she's killing us one by one!"

"Your little game is finished! Now *we're* going to kill *you*!"

The two tall boys nodded at each other, and started to beat Ree. They had lost all self-control. Being locked up in this place and seeing people die right in front of them must have terrified them out of their wits.

Yang yelled, "Stop it!" and tried to intervene, but their difference in body size was too great, and they simply kicked him aside.

Then the German boy shouted, raising the knife.

The children screamed.

He swung the knife down with all his strength. Yang saw that he was aiming directly at Ree's heart, and slammed into him with his own body. Several other kids surrounding us yelled at the German boy to stop.

The impact of Yang barreling into the German boy deflected the knife from Ree's heart, causing it to slide lightly along her side instead. The boy had swung down the knife with such force that it made a loud thud against the floorboard as it fell on the red carpet, missing Ree.

The knife must have been very sharp. Bright red blood streamed from the shallow cut on her side, the open wound staining her skin red like a blooming flower.

Everyone held their breath.

Then Ree let out a thin scream, and fainted dead away.

Once the Austrian boy caught sight of her blood, that seemed to pull him back to awareness, and he quickly pulled his hands away from Ree. But the German boy, with bloodshot eyes, picked up the knife again and raised it into the air.

I flung away the corpse that I was holding in my arms, opened the drawer, and took out the small pistol. I lifted it with both hands, and yelled out, "Get away from Ree, or I'll shoot!"

The German boy froze, and turned around, a look of disbelief in his eyes. He quietly raised his hands up above his head.

The other children stared at me with shocked faces.

Silence engulfed the hallway.

As I held the gun, I could feel my arms shaking. I didn't know if what I was doing was right or wrong. The only thought that filled my mind was the desire to save Ree. She was a good and kind girl;

that much I knew, even if we couldn't communicate with words.

Yang opened his mouth, and said in a quiet voice, "Alex. Calm down."

"Okay..."

"Where did you find that gun?"

"It was in here," I said, motioning to the chest of drawers. Everyone's gazes immediately converged on that spot. "I found it a little while ago. I don't know why, but there are weapons on board this ship. Ree must have found that knife the same way. Maybe it was for self-defense, or maybe she wanted to tell everybody about it, but either way, I think she was just holding a knife that she found and nothing more than that."

"What?!" hissed the German boy.

"Get away from Ree. Yang, take care of her wound."

Yang nodded, and crouched down next to her. He tore off his own shirt and pressed it to her side.

I turned my attention back to the two boys, who were still holding their hands in the air. "I'm not going to shoot you. I'd never do something like that. But ... I just want us to stop suspecting each other. We're all in this together, so let's just hurry up and get to the radio room—"

"I, I don't think so!" the German boy shouted, his voice trembling. He was starting to look obstinate again. He grabbed the hesitating Austrian boy and walked away with him.

"Hey!" I called after them.

"So there's weapons around? Then we'll arm ourselves, too. You expect us to trust each other? When there's a girl here hiding a knife?" They shot one last hateful glance at Ree on the floor, then started pulling out drawers one by one from the chests lined up along the walls, searching for weapons.

After they had traveled a ways down the hallway, I heard one of them yell from afar, "I found one!" But they had gone around the corner and I couldn't see what was happening.

Suddenly, the Turkish boy stood up. He had dark skin and long, graceful limbs. The boy started yelling something in his deep voice, sounding indignant. I didn't understand what he was saying, but I could guess that he was telling them that it was dangerous, and was calling them to come back. He pointed down the hallway, then pointed at himself, and with a nod, took off running.

The Turkish boy's slim body rounded the corner and disappeared.

The very next moment...

I heard a gunshot. It was so loud that felt like the floor, walls, and even the air vibrated. Then, in the corner of my eye, I saw the boy's body reappear from around the corner. He flew backwards and landed on the floor face up.

All was silent.

...A few seconds later, somebody screamed.

I ran up to the Turkish boy, my gun in hand. I was reaching out to rouse him when I saw the gaping hole in his chest. For a instant, I thought I could see the pattern of the carpet through that hole. And then all I saw was blood, oozing out and staining the floor.

I immediately knew that he had been shot by a very high-powered gun. The Turkish boy's face was frozen in a slight grimace. He had died instantly, without even enough time to realize what had happened to himself.

I looked up and saw the German and Austrian boys running away. The German boy was holding what looked like a machine gun.

two

[2]

Three people were dead: Huey, the Hungarian girl, and the Turkish boy. Ree had fainted from pain and blood loss, and I carried her on my back down the hallway, toward the radio room at the bow of the ship. Now there were six of us left: Yang, the Chinese boy; the black-haired Ree; me, plus a strapping Italian boy with strong features. In contrast to him was a tall, thin American boy, his hair loosely curled like a cherub's. There was also a petite French girl with long, braided brunette hair.

We said nothing as we walked along, our faces tense with fear.

Unlike the luxurious upper floors, the lower levels were dark and dreary, giving me a unsettling feeling in the pit of my stomach. The lamps and doorknobs that dotted the hallways seemed to be shifting into slightly plainer and more utilitarian designs.

The French girl walking in front suddenly let out a forlorn cry. She looked over her shoulder at us and shook her head helplessly.

Once again, we had found a wall blocking the middle of the hallway, and we couldn't pass. We turned around back to the stairwell to go down yet another floor.

Yang called out to me. "Alex. That was brave of you back there."

"Nah, that was nothing compared to what you did...."

"Do you still have that gun?"

I nodded, and Yang asked if he could see it. I handed it over to him.

"This is the safety," he said. "You need to release it before you can shoot."

"Oh." I nodded, then I thought for a moment. "...So if I had pulled

the trigger before, nothing would've happened?"

"Yeah. But I didn't think you would do that anyway."

Our eyes met. Yang smiled at me, his eyes narrowing into thread-like slits.

We took the stairs, descending one more floor. The five of us walked down a hallway that seemed even gloomier than the last one. Ree was still unconscious on my back. I worried that her bleeding hadn't stopped yet, but for now there was nothing I could do except keep on walking. I concentrated on just getting through this hallway, praying all the while that it wouldn't be blocked off by another wall.

This floor had many old and austere-looking cabins and dining rooms for the second-class passengers and the engineers. The lighting was shadowy, and the carpet, which must have originally been crimson-colored, was darkened and threadbare.

Suddenly, the French girl started to talk softly about something completely unrelated, about the countryside where she grew up. I scratched my head at the unexpected topic.

"We used to raise sheep. But we were poor, so we didn't own that many. My family ate cheese that we made from their milk. We were all in good health back then. I had a friend from a rich family, and I used to go play with her in her family's wine cellar. I miss those days..."

If I looked closely at the girl with the braided hair, wearing ragged boys' clothing, she was actually pretty cute. But now her face was ashen with fear.

After listening to her for a while, the American boy decided to join in, speaking loudly in a forced tone of cheerfulness, "Eww, sheep cheese! Who'd want to eat something stinky like that?" His voice hadn't changed yet, and he sounded girlish and sweet.

The French girl pouted, and tried to argue with him, "Oh, but it's so

tasty.”

“Hmm... I used to live next to a cornfield. Do you like corn? Back then, we made corn soup nearly every day. Sometimes we put it in a meat stew. ...I could sure use some right about now.”

In his calm and gentle voice, Yang began to tell his own story. When his father was still alive, they used to go traveling together. After Yang was orphaned, he was able to eke out a living unloading cargo at the port. The traveling lifestyle was lots of fun....

Now the Italian boy let out a bored snort. “Should we really be talking about this right now? I don’t want to hear it.”

With the wind taken out of our sails, we shut our mouths. For the next few minutes, we walked in silence.

Then the American boy suddenly spoke. “None of us is the killer. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Everyone stared at him, startled.

The American boy continued eagerly in his girlish voice. “I’ve been thinking. It’s true that we might be the only ones on board this ship, and that there’s weapons hidden all over. But it doesn’t mean any one of us is a murderer. That’s what I think.”

“Yeah!” enthusiastically shouted the French girl, nodding. “I think so, too. There must be some other bad people who locked us up in here. I don’t know why they would do that, but there’s someone who brought us all the way to this ship, and were even mean enough to break the rudder, just so they could have fun watching us suffer. That’s why they built these walls in the hallways. It’s not something any of us could have done.”

The two of them nodded at each other. But the Italian boy with the sharp features snapped at them, “Don’t be ridiculous! Then how did Huey die? There wasn’t anyone there except us. When Yang turned on the flashlight, Ree was the only one around. And there was that knife in that girl’s throat....”

As he spoke, he seemed to think back to that scene, and his voice

trembled. "If that Hungarian girl had met some stranger who wasn't in our group, wouldn't she have at least screamed? But when she got stabbed, she didn't make a sound. That means the person who killed her was one of us."

"Well... you have a point..." The American boy groped for a response, but in the end he could only hang his head.

Silence descended upon the group.

Then Yang looked up at me. "Alex... Do you remember when we went to the deck?"

"Yeah, I do."

"When that Hungarian girl hurt her cheek, there was something she said...."

I thought back to that time. After we came out to the deck, the Hungarian girl walked to the railing, and then cried out for help.

Something just grazed my cheek....

I remembered that. She said...

Right after I walked over here, something flew at me and fell into the water....

Yang nodded. "That girl must have stepped on something. Once she did, an arrow or something shot out and grazed her cheek. Because there wasn't anyone standing in the direction that she was pointing in."

The Italian boy leaned toward him. "So, what you're saying is...?"

A cautious look passed over Yang's face. "What if the person behind all this laid out traps for us to trigger automatically? Maybe no one stabbed her with the knife; it was just set up to jump out when someone passed through that area."

"You're kidding me...."

We started trying to open doors and move around furniture, while crouching low to the ground for safety's sake. In one particular room, an arrow shot through the air the moment we opened the door. The Italian boy went inside, and carefully searched every nook and cranny. But there was no one there.

In another area, a hammer fell from the wall, narrowly missing the French girl's head. Yang pushed the girl away in time for a large chunk of metal to pass directly in front of her nose. The hammer was rigged to fall when someone stepped on a certain part of the floor.

These traps weren't in every room or hallway. But we could sense how ruthless and irrational they were. We were terrified. Everyone pulled closer together as we walked, trying both to warm our bodies and shield each other from harm.

After a while, the French girl suddenly shuddered.

"What's wrong?"

"...I hear water."

We strained to listen, but didn't hear anything. I began to ask the French girl again what she had heard, but Yang shushed me, and I swallowed my words.

Finally...

I started to hear a faint dripping sound.

What could be causing it? I stood there for a moment, uncertain.

Then Yang yelled out, "We're sinking!"

"What?!"

"It's happening slowly, but water is entering the hull. My guess is ... we'll sink by tomorrow morning. Let's hurry! We need to get to the ship's bow!"

The moment that we all nodded at each other, I heard some

children scream somewhere in the distance.

I ran to the source of the scream as fast as I could. I turned the corner and arrived at the elevator, which was glaringly illuminated by lamps. Since we had descended to the lower levels of the ship, the hallways and rooms were gloomy and bleak, but this corner happened to be oddly bright, almost blindingly so.

The scream had to have come from around here. But I didn't see anyone....

I was looking around in confusion when suddenly a thick arm appeared out of nowhere. That arm grabbed my hair roughly, and yanked me to the side. I let out a scream.

Then the owner of that arm spoke in my ear. "Help me!"

...It was a familiar voice, speaking in a German accent.

I turned around and saw that the arm came from inside the elevator. The two German and Austrian boys were standing inside the iron cage. Their large, grownup-looking bodies shook spasmodically as they reached out to me.

"Wh-what happened?!"

"Help us! Unlock it, unlock it!"

I went to lower Ree down from my shoulders to the floor, and ran back to the elevator. I banged loudly on the iron lattice doors, but they were locked from the outside and wouldn't open. The rest of the children rushed over and asked what had happened, but the two boys inside were frightened out of their wits and couldn't give us a straight answer.

"I saw a ghost!"

"It took our gun, and threw us in here!"

Yang turned to us and yelled, "That reminds me. Alex, the gun!"

I took out the gun, but when the two boys saw it, they screamed, overcome by fear.

“Stand back!” I yelled. I aimed at the lock, and pulled the trigger. A powerful shock wave ran up my arms to my shoulders. The sound was so loud that my ears rang. My first shot missed, so I shot again right afterwards. The lock shattered and fell from the iron lattice with a muffled clank.

“Thank God!” I breathed, relieved from the bottom of my heart. I saw the tension drain out of the boys’ expressions.

Yang quickly reached out to open the latticed doors.

But that very moment...

The elevator suddenly began to drop.

The boy’s faces stiffened in terror. They opened their eyes so wide that it seemed like their eyeballs would pop out, and they grabbed my hair again with their sturdy arms. I screamed, and they shrieked back. I heard the sound of my hair getting torn out by the roots. A dull pain ran through my scalp, prickling the inside of my eyes.

Through the metal lattice, I caught a glimpse of their faces, stricken with horror and rage. The iron cage jerked from one side to the other, and then suddenly fell, disappearing into the abyss.

Their screams ripped through my eardrums, but after no more than an instant, those too faded away.

And then...

Far below, I heard something splash.

The elevator was broken. Yang and I tried desperately to bring it back up, but it wouldn’t move. In the end I was reduced to crying and banging my hands against it.

The American boy gently placed a hand on my shoulder. I turned to

him with tears in my eyes, and silently shook my head.

The French girl was standing behind him, crying soundlessly.

“Those two ... are already dead,” said the American boy.

“No!”

“It’s already been ten minutes. The elevator would have flooded by now ... and they would have drowned.”

The Italian boy pounded the wall, howling like an animal.

three

[3]

If the ship was slowly sinking, we couldn't stay there for long. I hefted a still unconscious Ree onto my back and started walking again with the remaining children. We walked carefully, looking out for traps. When we ran into another wall, we returned to the stairwell. As we descended deeper into the ship, the lighting got dimmer, and the hallways looked more rundown. The sound of water was getting louder and louder.

"He said it was locked from the outside," murmured Yang, as if talking to himself.

Walking beside him, I nodded. "Yeah. And that a ghost did it."

"What could he have meant by that?"

"Who knows?"

Yang continued, "All of the traps we've found were triggered automatically. But this time was different. There's someone else here besides us, hiding on board this ship so he can hunt us down. That's the only possibility I can think of."

We kept on walking through the hallway, but it was so dark that we could barely see what was in front of us. No one said a word. The only sound we heard was our own footsteps.

Then I heard Ree moan behind me.

"Ree? Are you awake?"

Grimacing in pain, she opened her eyes. Then she looked at me and smiled weakly in thanks.

For the next few minutes, Ree lay silently against my back. But suddenly, she yelped, and started to struggle.

I quickly lowered her to the floor. “What’s wrong?”

With a frenzied look in her eyes, she pointed at her throat.

“Oh!”

Her pendant was gone.

Her pink, heart-shaped enamel pendant—Ree’s beloved amulet.

Yang was watching us, and he said dismissively, “This isn’t the time for that. You can just buy another one later. If we can survive this, then you can do whatever you want after you go back home. Try to be strong.”

Ree shook her head over and over again, her jet-black eyes filling with tears.

Yang looked away from her face, and instead took off his own shirt to staunch the bleeding from her wound on her side, which had opened up again slightly.

It looked like we would have to wait there for a few minutes. As I waited, I suddenly remembered how Ree fussed over me and smiled at me so gently when I first woke up on the ship. When I thought of how I had awakened to find this girl at my side, worried for my sake, trying to encourage me with her precious heart-shaped pendant, my heart ached.

And now here she was, deathly pale, enduring her pain in silence.

I jumped up. Yang looked up at me curiously. “What’s wrong, Alex?”

“I’m, uh, going to go ... get something.”

“Huh?”

“Her pendant. She probably dropped it where Huey collapsed. After they started fighting over the knife, I think I remember that she wasn’t wearing it anymore.”

“Alex!” Yang hissed warningly. “It’s dangerous. Stay here. Don’t separate from the group.”

The other children also tried to stop me.

“He’s right. She can just buy another pendant!” said the American boy.

The French girl added, “It’s dangerous. We should stay together.”

“Don’t waste time on a little thing like that!”

I looked down at Ree’s wan face. I couldn’t be sure whether she had enough strength to last until this was all over. All I wanted was to find her pendant and give it to her. There was no other way for me to communicate with her. My gratitude wasn’t something I could convey with words.

“I just have to go back to the landing, so it shouldn’t take long. I’ll be back soon,” I declared forcefully, then took off running.

The voices of Yang and the other children echoed after me.

I climbed the dark staircase. Lighting up the area at my feet with the flashlight that Yang had taken from the elevator, I carefully climbed step by step, trying not to stumble into any traps.

The white-tiled floor gleamed coldly, illuminated by the circle of light from the flashlight. Uneasiness surged through me. Now that we were separated, would I ever be able to see the others again? Would I end up being left to wander this ship all by myself? Assailed by second thoughts, I felt tears rise unbidden in the corners of my eyes. I kept on climbing, one step at a time, trying to chase away these dark mental images.

Right when I thought I had reached the spot where Huey had collapsed, I nearly tripped over something round and rubbery. Fearing I had stepped into a trap, chills ran through my body. I quickly pointed the flashlight at my feet, and saw that it was no trap, but a small ball—a tennis ball.

I picked it up, mystified. *Why would it be on the floor in a place like this?* I wondered to myself.

I returned to climbing the stairs.

And then I gasped.

The body was gone.

The spot where Huey's body should have been was now empty. There was nothing left to indicate that that a corpse had been there. It had vanished without a trace.

I sank down to the floor, dumbfounded.

With the movement of my body, the flashlight's aim turned to shine on a different spot by my feet. There on the floor I spotted a shiny pink heart-shaped enamel pendant—Ree's precious pendant that she had been looking for. Once I sighted it, for a moment it felt like my heart was connected with hers. I breathed a sigh of relief.

I picked it up and squeezed it in my hand. Tears overflowed from my eyes. I didn't even know why.

Where was the body?

Why had someone hidden it?

Who else was on the ship?

one

chapter four — the hares and the hound

[1]

The five of them quietly walked down the hallway. Victorique and Kazuya kept pace at the back of the group. In front of them was Julie Guile, carrying the hem of her red dress, her long black hair bouncing from side to side with each step. Ned Baxter took the lead. Maurice strode along quickly, a few paces removed from the rest of the group.

The red carpet was fluffy, softly enveloping their feet as they trod upon it. It was luxurious, but hard to walk on. The lamps that shone brightly down on them were also much too gaudy and elaborate.

Ned came to an abrupt stop. “Wh-what’s this?” he stuttered.

Everyone halted, and looked up. What stopped them in their tracks as they headed toward the bow of the ship was a black wall blocking their way. All of the hallways on that floor were blocked by that wall, and they could advance no further.

Maurice clicked his tongue. “It’s the same as ten years ago....”

When Ned and Julie stepped toward him questioningly, Maurice began to explain, a dark look in his eyes. “Letting the hares go straight to the radio room would be far too dull. It was necessary for us to thin the herd first by letting them die in the traps, or having them find weapons so they could injure each other.”

After a beat of silence, Julie asked, “Why?”

Maurice gave no answer. He was quiet for a minute, then sighed. “We’ll have to go down three more floors. The next one down and the one below that should be cut off by the same wall. If this ship is the same as the *Queen Berry*, that is.”

The five of them went back down the hallway in search of the stairwell.

Kazuya looked over at Victorique walking next to him. She hadn't said a word the whole time, but he could hear the faint sound of her breathing. Starting to feel worried, he peered down at her. Droplets of sweat were collecting on the pale brow of her small, doll-like face.

"...Victorique, are you tired?"

She said nothing.

"Do your feet hurt? Are you hungry? Oh, that bag must be heavy. Let me carry it."

"No need."

"Trying to grin and bear it? Don't do that, okay? It's not like you."

"...Kujou, whenever you try to control me...." Victorique looked up at him, her cheeks puffed out like those of a sullen child. Her own intent was probably quite different, but the impression she gave was of an adorable squirrel that had stuffed its cheeks full of nuts. "...It really makes my blood boil!"

"Huh?! Who's trying to control you?! I'm just worried about you. You're too pigheaded and proud for your own good!"

"You're the pigheaded one!"

"No, *you* are!" yelled Kazuya. And with this, he wrested away her bag, grabbed her small hand with his unoccupied one, and started walking again.

Julie stared at them, startled. Ned pretended not to notice them.

As they walked, Kazuya started talking again to Victorique. His head was filled with questions, and he hadn't had the chance to ask anyone until now. "Say, Victorique. What do you think is going on

here?”

There was no answer.

He looked at her profile, and saw that she seemed to be listening to him, at least for now. Feeling reassured, he kept talking. “What happened ten years ago on the original *Queen Berry*? Why would they put children our age on this ship? And what on earth happened while they were on board? And I wonder why, ten years later, someone would build such an elaborate replica to recreate those events?”

Victorique didn’t reply. She simply kept on walking at Kazuya’s side, moving along with tiny footsteps.

“Who could be doing this, and why...?” Kazuya remembered the dinner they had in that dining room—how gloomy that room was.

And he remembered the guide who fled the ship in a lifeboat, and the way his orange lamp flickered, then vanished into the sea.

And then there were the eleven guests seated in the dining room. Someone put sedatives into their food and moved them to the lounge. After that, the group increased by one.

Someone who hadn’t been seated at the table slipped into the crowd. Would that person be the mastermind of this blood-drenched re-enactment?

“...Well, I know that Ned was definitely there,” Kazuya continued.

Victorique finally spoke. “Because you were sitting on his lap.”

“Y-yeah... So that would mean either Julie or Maurice is the twelfth guest. If we just consider their ages, then Julie is the more suspicious one, since she’s young. I mean, ten years ago, she would’ve been in her mid-teens, the same age as those kids who were put on this ship.”

Kazuya thought to himself for a moment. “But in that case, why would Ned be sent an invitation, too? Maurice is apparently one of the people who were involved in putting them on this ship, and

that's how he ended up getting invited here, and nearly dying here. But what about Ned? He would've been a teenager ten years ago, too. I guess that means ... he could have been one of the victims."

"Kujou, why do you keep rambling on and on about such obvious things?" Victorique said, sounding infinitely weary.

"But still," Kazuya glumly objected. "There's so many things I don't understand about all this."

"...."

"Oh, now that I think of it, Ned could be the culprit, too. He could've planned this together with Julie.... No, probably not, or else they could have just killed Maurice themselves without having to go through such roundabout methods...."

"Uh-huh. There you go again, stating the obvious."

"E-easy for you to say.... Oh, I just thought of that fortune-teller Roxane, who was murdered before we got on the ship. Roxane was one of the people invited here, and the maid who probably killed her escaped...."

"Right, Kujou."

"Um, so..."

"So?"

"Hmm... Dunno."

"Your chaos is truly tedious," muttered Victorique in abject disinterest.

Kazuya fell into a sulk, and returned to leading Victorique by the hand in silence.

They finally arrived at the stairwell, which was lined with gleaming white tile. But for some reason, it was very dark inside, as if a cloak of inky blackness had fallen.

Next to it was the elevator, where incandescent lamps shone glaringly bright in contrast to the dim stairwell. The inside of the iron cage was also fully lit, making it look much safer in comparison. But when Kazuya pointed to the elevator and suggested they take it, Ned inexplicably turned pale and shook his head.

“Let’s take the stairs. It’s safer that way ... probably.”

Kazuya and Victorique exchanged a look. Victorique shrugged. “If he says so.”

The five of them entered the dark stairwell and carefully climbed down. They descended slowly, step by step, and after they had traveled some ways, all of a sudden...

They heard a brief thud.

Maurice uttered a strangled yelp.

The other four jumped, their hearts skipping a beat.

“Wh-what’s wrong, mister?” yelled Julie.

“Y-y-you...!” Maurice pointed a trembling finger into the darkness, and everyone turned to look.

An arrow had embedded itself into the wall, narrowly missing his face. When the others examined the vicinity, they found a button inconspicuously hidden in the tile flooring. Maurice had presumably stepped on it accidentally.

He slowly narrowed his eyes, giving the arrow a hard stare. “H-how dare you threaten me?!” he hissed, glaring at Victorique and the others balefully.

“Mister, are you okay?” asked Ned.

This only enraged Maurice further. “Am I okay?” One of you is a hare who set that trap for me, isn’t that right? Or maybe you’re all in on it, all of you trying to kill me!”

“Stop it, mister!” Julie frowned, fingering her heart-shaped pendant. “If that were true, then I wouldn’t have tried to stop you from getting in that lifeboat. Enough with the false accusations.”

They glared at each other.

In that tension-filled silence, Kazuya’s voice suddenly rang out, calmly addressing Victorique beside him. “Victorique, don’t forget to watch out for traps. Of course, I’ll be looking out for you, too....”

When she heard his gentle, serious tone, Julie’s stern expression softened. But her face turned suspicious again when she heard Victorique’s response.

Victorique replied in a voice full of confidence, “I have nothing to be worried about.”

Kazuya stared at her, momentarily taken aback.

The three adults sensed something unspoken in her words, and turned to look in her direction. Ned walked up to her, a threatening expression on his face. “Hey! What’s that supposed to mean?”

His voice and bearing were intimidating, but Victorique showed no signs of flinching. As coolly as ever, she replied, “This ship was made to kill adults. So I’ll be fine.”

“How can you be so sure? The traps don’t care who falls into them. If you open the wrong door, or step on something, or touch something, then, little girl, even you won’t be safe.”

Victorique skeptically tilted her head to one side, and smiled at him angelically. “All of the traps were set according to the heights of adults like you, so that they can pierce through a human brain on someone around one hundred and seventy to one hundred eighty centimeters tall.”

“Oh!” Kazuya cried out. She had a point. Both the arrow that had killed that man at the beginning, along with the one that shot out just a few minutes ago, flew through the air at around that height. This meant that even if Victorique were to trigger one of the traps, at her own height of one hundred and forty centimeters tall, it

would sail far above her head.

As Kazuya gazed at her speechlessly, Victorique spoke to him in the innocent tone of a child reciting a fact that she had learnt. “Kujou, you’d better stoop down a bit, too. If not, your brain might be safe, but you might get a little shave off the top.”

“A little sh-shave... Eek!” Kazuya started walking again, this time slouching as he led Victorique by the hand. He squeezed her hand even more tightly than before, and kept an eye on her face for signs of fatigue.

Julie walked behind them, watching them closely.

The stairwell was as dark as ever. Since they had to stay on the lookout for traps, they could only make very slow progress, and the stairs seemed to drag on without end.

“Hey,” Julie called out to Kazuya from behind. “You’re awfully kind, aren’t you, kid?”

Kazuya looked up at her. *What is she talking about?* he wondered in bewilderment.

Julie glanced at Victorique beside him. “You defended that girl with all your heart.”

At the sound of her teasing tone, Kazuya went red in the face. “N-not really... And all she does is complain.”

“She depends on you,” Julie said casually.

Kazuya was thrown for a loop. “She does?!”

“She’s still a girl like any other. I can tell that she trusts you, even if she’s cold to you. She lets you carry her bag, and see? She never lets go of your hand.”

Kazuya concentrated on the sensation in his hand. It was true that Victorique had been holding his hand tightly, even as she spouted

complaints at him. Maybe she really did trust him a little bit. Or maybe this was just her way of reacting to a stressful situation. She didn't seem to be remotely anxious if her attitude or words were any indication, but Kazuya thought he could feel her emotions flowing through their linked hands. He instinctively squeezed her hand back.

"...You know, kid, that type of girl would never let just anyone handle their stuff, not unless it's someone they trust a lot. You can bet on it."

"But before we went on our trip, I went through her luggage without permission, and even removed some of her things and lectured her about it...."

"Well, if you were anyone else, she'd never let you do that to her, not for love or money. If someone else felt like pulling that, she wouldn't bother traveling at all. She'd just turn around and go right back home."

"Hmm..." Kazuya thought to himself. When he noticed Julie watching him with an appreciative look on her face, he protested bashfully, "But I just ... I just feel some responsibility about all this."

"Oh, are you the killer?"

"Please don't joke about that. That's not what I meant...." Kazuya's face clouded over.

In fact, he had been the one to bring Victorique on this trip. As far as he knew, she always spent her time in the conservatory of the school library. It was a relaxing space, illuminated by skylights at the top floor, and said to have been built for a king to rendezvous with his lover. There Victorique would read through her books and occasionally listen to cases from the outside world, which she would then solve in a flash. Her existence was mysterious, like a tiny god, a spirit haunting St. Marguerite's School. Kazuya imagined her spending her days in peace, surrounded by wonder and intrigue.

But then he had to be the one to invite her out on a weekend trip,

and wind up bringing her to such a dangerous place. If anything were to happen to Victorique, it would be his fault.

Her mind was all she possessed. But her body was so small and so fragile. Even if he was no more than a powerless child himself, he had to protect her at the very least.

This was what Kazuya believed, and it was this aspect of his character that led people to call him too solemn and rigid. But it stemmed from what his father, who was always so strict on himself and on others, and adult brothers would repeatedly tell him: *You must protect those weaker than yourself. Even if you yourself are weak, you must go beyond your limits and protect others.*

But if he had to be honest with himself, there was no way he was capable of such things, and he was far from being such a fine example of a human being. Going beyond his limits could only be beyond his limits in the end. But now, as he faced Julie, he found himself unwilling to admit to such weakness. He had his pride, too....

He couldn't tell if Julie suspected the truth or not when she replied teasingly, "Oh, my, what a fine lad you are."

"Not at all... You see, it's just because I'm the third son of an imperial soldier."

"But you're first and foremost a boy." Julie giggled.

Julie's laughter made Kazuya blush, but she went on playfully. "I love boys like you. Let's get through this and go home together."

Although her words were said innocently, Kazuya still felt embarrassed by them. He didn't know how to answer, and mumbled something noncommittal.

They finally arrived at their intended floor. Ned called out from ahead in a reassuring tone, "We're here!"

Kazuya breathed a sigh of relief and turned to Victorique. "Just a little longer now."

But the next moment...

Maurice arrived right behind Ned, and cried out in despair.

Kazuya and Julie shot each other an apprehensive glance, but continued their descent. As they walked down the last two steps, they heard splashing sounds, and through their shoes they felt the sensation of stepping through water. Up ahead they could see the reflections of the pale lamplight.

Before them was seawater.

This floor was already thoroughly flooded, filled with murky water up to their knees.

The level containing the cargo hold and the engine room looked dramatically different from the floors above. This hallway was dreary and filthy, like the inside of a giant sewer pipe, and dirty water sloshed all around them in small waves. It made for a hopeless sight.

Ned and Maurice looked at each other, stunned.

Maurice was the first one to start yelling. "What the hell is this?! Now how are we going to get there?!"

Ned put his face in his hands and groaned softly.

Julie was the next one to reach the bottom of the staircase, and she started down the hallway, splashing through water up to her knees. The two men stared after her, making no attempt to follow. She looked back and shouted at Kazuya, "What are you doing? Hurry up! If we're quick, we can still make it!"

"Uh ... yes, ma'am!" Kazuya hesitated for a moment, then nodded firmly. He crouched down in front of Victorique and said, "Get on!"

For a second, Victorique made a face like a pigeon that had just been shot in mid-air.

Julie shouted in the distance, “Come on!”

“Hurry, hurry! There’s not much time!”

“Ugh...” Victorique moaned, then reluctantly climbed onto Kazuya’s back.

She felt much too light to be a human, making Kazuya feel more like he was carrying a dog or a cat. Despite her seeming unwillingness to climb onto him, once she was in place, she wrapped her slender arms around his neck and squeezed very tightly.

“Ouch, Victorique, you’re choking me.”

“...That’s a cross you’ll have to bear.”

“No, you’ll kill me!”

Kazuya kicked up sprays of water as he waded through the hallway. From behind, he heard Maurice and Ned also start moving.

Finally, Julie’s cheerful voice came from ahead. “Hooray! The hallway on this floor isn’t blocked off! We can get to the other side! Let’s hurry to the stairs!”

Once he heard her shout, Kazuya quickened his pace. Victorique started swinging her little legs against his back, craning her body—perhaps she was in a better mood now, too. When she nearly slid into the water, Kazuya tightened his grip on her. Whether or not she knew just how much he strained to keep her from falling, she kept on happily flailing nonetheless.

Once they reached the forward staircase, they again began to slowly climb, while making sure to avoid traps.

Maurice grumbled, “Why did this have to happen? The hare is somewhere close by. I can’t be too careful.” Then he suddenly shouted, “Oh!” and ran out to the hallway on the next floor up.

That hallway was still on one of the lower levels, and consequently the lighting was no brighter than before, and the carpet was again frayed and worn. It had once been scarlet, but the color was darker now, and starting to thin out in the center where many feet had worn a path. The lamps were minimally ornamented and had been selected merely for function's sake, and the walls were constructed with heavily knotted wood.

Maurice ran through the hallway, throwing open every door in his path. These were the third-class cabins, which were tightly crammed with bunk beds all the way up to the ceiling. Apparently in search of something, he systematically opened door after door, but the cabins only stretched on endlessly.

Ned called out to him in surprise. "Mister, what are you doing?"

"If this ship is a copy of the original box, then it should be around here. Yes ... Here it is!" Maurice's face twisted in an expression of triumph.

Ned approached him, but then cried out and stopped suddenly.

Maurice turned around, gripping a pistol. Held aloft by his shaking hands, it shimmered as black as the night.

Ned yelled, "Whoa!" and ran to hide behind Victorique and Kazuya.

Maurice grinned and pointed the muzzle in their direction. "There are countless weapons hidden all over this ship. Everywhere, in drawers, flower pots, under the carpet... And this is one of them."

"Why...?" Julie's voice came from behind them. She gazed at Maurice sadly, her hands trembling, tears forming in her eyes.

Maurice's face looking back at her was impassive. "To have us kill each other," he proclaimed haughtily, as if he were stating a fact that should have been obvious to all.

"What are you talking about?"

Maurice shrugged. "Some of them died in the traps. Others found weapons, and used them to kill each other. That was our plan. If too

many survived, there would be no point.”

“What the hell kind of plan is that!?”

“There’s no need for you to know why. Besides...” Maurice smirked.
“We also had a hound.”

“...A hound?”

“That’s right.” Maurice was silent. Then he slowly cocked the gun. The bullets slid into the magazine with a ghastly clink. “...Die, you hares!”

Kazuya realized that Maurice was aiming the gun directly at Victorique, and cried out in shock, “Stop! Monsieur Maurice, why are you doing this? You said yourself that Victorique comes from a noble family, and couldn’t possibly be behind this!”

“But now that it’s come to this, I can’t be sure of anything anymore. Fortunately, I have six bullets. I’ll kill all of you, and escape from this ship by myself!”

“What?!”

“This ship will sink soon enough. Any evidence will go with it to the bottom of the sea. Just like ten years ago!”

Kazuya moved to stand before Victorique, directly in front of the muzzle. Sweat dripped down his back, and soon enough, his knees started to knock. He grit his teeth and continued to stand in place.

Then Victorique gave him a nonchalant poke in the back. “Kujou... What are you doing?”

“Wh-wh-what am I d-doing? I, I’m protecting you from the threatening bullets!”

“Even if it means you die?”

“I, I might. But then you’ll l-live.”

“Well, you’ve got a point there.”

“I, I’m the one who invited you. I have to make sure you go home safely. It’s my duty as the third son of an imperial soldier.”

A scene played back in Kazuya’s mind—of his father, always so stern, with his head held up high, and his two older brothers who were just like their father. It was a warm and sunny afternoon at the neighborhood dojo they used to attend, and an adult had just flung him to the ground. Kazuya didn’t have the nerve to face him, and simply crawled on all fours on the white tatami, on the verge of tears, even though he knew that boys weren’t supposed to cry. He felt humiliated, and sad, and pathetic.... He remembered the faces of his brothers looking down on him with such disappointment.

He’s spoiled because he’s the youngest.... someone in the dojo muttered, probably one of the adults looking on. That casual remark had left an unhealed wound within his heart.

“So, V-Victorique...” Kazuya looked down at her, his expression grave.

And she was staring back at him, her large, emerald-green eyes wide open.

Kazuya realized that this was the first time he had ever seen Victorique truly shocked. Up until now, whenever he had reported to her about various strange cases, she would joyfully gobble up those mysteries—or as she called them, “chaos”. He remembered the look of mild surprise she seemed to wear during those times.

But the expression on her face at this moment was completely different. She was genuinely shocked, as if she had discovered something very unusual and wanted to keenly observe it.

And then she murmured very thoughtfully, “Kujou, are you in fact ... a good person?”

“What’s that for? ...Are you praising me?”

“No.”

“Are you trying to make fun of me?”

“...What’s wrong with you? It’s a simple statement of fact. Why do you have to get so worked up about it?”

“Ugh...” Just when Kazuya was about to get angry...

He heard the sound of a gunshot.

He pulled the trigger...!?

Kazuya automatically crouched down and threw his arms around Victorique to shield her. He shut his eyes tightly, a wordless scream catching in his throat.

Scenes from his life—watching his successful brothers grow up, while all he could do was spend every moment of his childhood studying. Making the decision to study abroad, and leaving the country. His days spent at St. Marguerite’s School, and his first meeting with Victorique, which could be called fateful, or perhaps irreversible, but was at the very least stunning—all of these ran through his mind like a kaleidoscope, and then faded to black.

...Huh?

Kazuya was not dead.

He hesitantly opened his eyes, and found Victorique squirming to get away from him.

“...You’re hurting me. Are you trying to kill me?”

“Hey!” What kind of thing is that to say to the person who just saved your life, Kazuya wanted to yell angrily at her as he released his hands from Victorique’s thin body.

Maurice was lying on the floor, a black hole in the middle of his forehead. He had died with a very surprised look on his face.

Kazuya turned around and saw Julie down on one knee, holding a small pistol. She had lifted the hem of her red dress, giving a peek of her blindingly white legs.

Julie lowered the gun and stood up, her face expressionless. “I found one, too. It was hidden behind one of the lamps on the wall. I didn’t know why it was there, so I didn’t want to say anything.” She sounded like she was giving an excuse.

Ned approached Maurice’s corpse, a menacing look in his eyes. He picked up the gun still gripped in Maurice’s lifeless hand, and threw it down the stairwell into the rising waters. The gun sank down with an ominous bubbling.

Ned turned to Julie. “Throw yours away, too.”

“What?!”

“I don’t want us to end up suspecting one another. If that happens, we’ll end up killing each other. I threw that gun away, so you do the same with yours.”

“But...”

“Or is there some reason that you want to carry a weapon?”

Julie sucked her teeth in frustration. She threw the pistol down the stairs, sending it splashing. Then she sucked her teeth again. “Let’s go to the radio room.”

As she started to climb the stairs again, her handbag slipped from her arm. Victorique caught it.

Kazuya raised his eyebrows at this. He hadn’t expected that Victorique would be considerate enough to pick up something that someone else had dropped.

But she apparently had no intention of returning it courteously, and simply threw it at Julie. The bag fluttered through the air into Julie’s waiting hands. Once she had it back safely, she went back to climbing the stairs. The three others followed behind her.

two

[2]

With each step Kazuya, Julie, and Ned took up the stairs, water dripped from their soaked clothing. Victorique was the only one still dry, but her elegant lace and frills, along with the silk socks that peeked out from underneath, were blackened with dirt.

When Kazuya happened to glance over and see this, he felt unspeakably remorseful and ashamed. Victorique should have been in her usual spot in the gardens of the library, reading her books in peace. That he should drag this girl to this squalid, sinking ship, when she ought to be exalted like a sacred being that no one dare disturb....

He gave her hand a tight squeeze. Victorique looked up at him with a dumbfounded expression. "...There's something I've been wondering about."

"What?"

"Kujou, you were yelling something about being the third son of an imperial soldier."

"Right."

"Is there some meaning attached to being the third son?"

Kazuya choked in rage, and angrily flung off her hand.

When Victorique saw that Kazuya was genuinely upset, she stuttered in surprise, "Wh-what are you so angry about?"

"You know what, you keep needling me with this 'good person' this and 'third son' that. Are you trying to pick a fight with me, Victorique?"

"N-no, I'm not. It's a simple statement of fact. I'm just

acknowledging it as another fragment of chaos.”

“Let me make this perfectly clear: I may be the third son, but my grades in school have been exceptional, better than anyone else in my family!”

Somehow, the two of them had ended up talking at cross purposes.

“...Are the most successful third sons in your country promoted to the status of first-born sons?”

“Of course not! ...It’s just for the sake of my pride. My older brothers always get preferential treatment, so I thought I would compete with them by throwing myself into my studies.”

Even so, on that day when he had been thrown to the ground of that neighborhood dojo, Kazuya felt like all of his effort had gone up in smoke. And so he jumped at the opportunity to leave his military academy to go study abroad in Sauvure. He’d gone through the application process, packed his bags, and boarded the ship before his loving mother or sister or anyone else in his family could stop him, as if escaping from his country, his family, and from himself....

And now he found himself here.

“Hmm...?” Victorique nodded. After a few moments of silence, she said in her calm and mellifluous voice, “It’s the same with the ruling class of this country. The inheritance always goes to the first-born son.”

Her expression again turned curious. She stared up at Kazuya, as if carefully regarding something extraordinary. “Pride, huh?”

“...Hmm?”

“Kujou, you’re not only a good person, you’re humble.”

“Huh?”

“The fact that you can admit to your pride shows that your soul is simple and beautiful.”

“Are you complimenting me? Or just insulting me in a roundabout way?” Kazuya snapped.

Victorique stared at him, puzzled. Then she wordlessly turned away from him. When Kazuya took a peek at her face, she was sulking, puffing up her cheeks like a squirrel storing away nuts. This was the expression she always wore when she was feeling put out.

He guessed that the conversation they had been having was probably Victorique’s way of praising him, maybe with the intention of thanking him for using his own body as a shield to protect her. Maybe she was trying to express her feelings of friendship toward him....

As Kazuya continued to grumble to himself, Victorique said sullenly, “You’re being ridiculous. It was just a simple statement of fact. I was merely articulating the reconstruction of chaos.”

And with this, she said no more.

But Kazuya now felt flummoxed, wondering why Victorique seemed to be so upset with him all of a sudden.

The four of them silently climbed the staircase.

Ned, walking in front, was nimbly playing catch with his tennis ball as always, not stopping for a moment even in the dark. He rounded a landing of the dim stairwell, his form slowly falling out of view.

The next moment, the others heard a dull thud, followed by what sounded like a short scream.

Kazuya and Julie shared a look.

“Ned?” Julie hesitantly called out.

There was no answer.

Kazuya added, “What happened?”

All was quiet inside the stairwell. Kazuya and Julie locked eyes again.

Then they both broke into a run up the stairs. Once they arrived at the darkened landing, a startling sight awaited them.

Ned, lying face down on the floor, dead.

Kazuya cried out and ran up to him.

Ned's legs pointed in Kazuya's direction, and his right hand was hidden underneath his body. His left arm was stretched out, with the palm placed on his hip as if he had been standing at attention.

Kazuya took his left hand and checked for a pulse.

But there was none.

How?! How...?! What could've happened? A trap? Was there some trap laid around here? Why is he dead?

"Kujou!" Victorique hissed at Kazuya, her husky voice curt. When he turned around, he saw that she was looking down at him with an uncharacteristically worried expression.

"What?"

"Come here, Kujou."

"Wait a minute. This man is dead. I have to check if there are any traps around here—"

"Never mind that. Get over here, Kujou," Victorique repeated stubbornly.

Kazuya felt irritation bubble up at the sound of her tone.

"Victorique, I've had just about enough of your attitude—"

"I'm scared. Please, don't leave my side.... I'm begging you, Kujou."

Kazuya was struck speechless. As he crouched down on one knee, he took a closer look at Victorique's face. She was staring back at him with her usual expression that brooked no dissent. *Come on,*

stand up, she seemed to be trying to tell him. What she said just now... *I'm scared; don't leave my side*, was something totally unlike what the Victorique he knew would say.

For a moment, Kazuya thought to himself, perplexed. Then he realized that Victorique had to be lying. *She isn't scared. And she would never beg me for anything.* He gulped. *That's it! Victorique is trying to goad me into action. She wants to move me away from Ned's body!*

Kazuya stood up and cautiously made his way over to Victorique, while glancing at Julie next to her. Julie was motionless, covering her mouth with both hands, opening her eyes wide as if she had just seen something unbelievable.

"Oh no, oh no," she whispered. "It's the same. It's the same. It's the same as back then! But how?"

What's going on with her? Kazuya wondered. He whispered to Victorique, "What's wrong?"

"Listen carefully, Kujou." Her voice was tense. "The three of us are going to exit the staircase on the next floor up and find a hiding place. And we'd better look for some weapons. They seem to be everywhere."

"Huh?"

Then she muttered some more enigmatic words, her face grim. "There's three of us and one of them. But I'm very unsure whether two children and a woman can defeat an adult man. Oh, it was a mistake to let her throw away her gun.... But it's too late to regret that now."

Julie whispered back, "What happened? What's going on?"

Victorique looked up. Her emerald-green eyes were wide open and filled with anxiety. She parted her thin, colorless lips, and spoke flatly. "We're going to be killed."

"What?!" Kazuya started to speak, but then closed his mouth, considering to himself that it was probably a good idea to do as she

said. He tugged on Julie, who was standing in a stupor, and together they gingerly stepped over Ned's body toward the stairs.

Victorique called out in a low voice, "Run!"

Kazuya held onto Victorique's hand tightly.

Since this floor was much closer to the top of the ship, the hallway was once again lined with luxuriously fluffy carpet and aglow with extravagant-looking lamps. They dashed inside the nearest room, which happened to be a spacious reading room for the first-class passengers. Chandeliers sparkled from the ceiling, and finely-carved bookshelves stretched along the walls. The three of them searched the room from top to bottom, on top of shelves, inside drawers, and under the carpet, while keeping an eye out for traps.

Kazuya found a small pair of brass knuckles inside a drawer and put them on both hands. Then he turned around to look at Julie, who was gripping a large paper knife, her shoulders heaving with every breath she took. Their gazes met. Julie raised her index finger and held it to her lips. Kazuya nodded in reply.

The room was perfectly still. Kazuya could feel the thump of his heartbeat in his chest, and it was getting louder. His temples throbbed with pain.

They sat there like that for several minutes.

...But nothing happened.

As Kazuya and Julie stared at each other, their expressions turned unsure. Kazuya turned to Victorique, whom he shielded behind himself, and started to ask her what was about to happen, but before he could finish his question....

The door quietly opened.

Standing there was Ned Baxter, who should have been dead.

Ned was clenching an enormous axe in his right hand. His perfectly expressionless face was unrecognizable, entirely unlike the Ned they knew before. The temperature in the room suddenly seemed to drop

several degrees.

Ned shook his head from side to side, and caught sight of Julie standing against the wall, glaring at him. He slowly walked up to her and lifted his axe into the air.

Julie preemptively slashed her knife in his direction, while shouting at Kazuya and Victorique, “What are you doing? Get out of here! Go to the radio room, and call for help!”

When Ned heard her, he languidly turned around, and saw Kazuya, with Victorique hidden behind him. Ned’s eyes were dark and empty, as if two holes had been opened in his head. They gazed at Victorique, and a burning fire ignited inside of them.

“A girl. You’re a hare!”

“What?!”

“I have to hunt the hares, because I’m the hound!”

Ned raised up his axe, and with a kick of his heels, leapt into the air, aiming directly at Victorique. Kazuya pushed her down to the floor. When Ned landed in front of him, Kazuya punched the side of his head as hard as he could. He was physically much smaller than Ned, but thanks to the brass knuckles he wore on his hands, he was able to inject a surprising amount of force into his punch. Once Kazuya’s fist made impact on Ned’s face, Ned was thrown flat on his back.

Julie ran up, and briskly ruffled Kazuya’s hair. “Well done. You’re a fine boy!”

“Well, I am the third son of—”

“Yes, yes, third son of an imperial soldier. Now let’s get out of here!”

Julie picked up the fallen axe. Once the three of them left the room, together they pushed a large cabinet that had been in the hallway in front of the door to block it from opening.

After they started running up the stairs, they heard the sound of Ned waking up again and slamming his body against the door.

As they climbed toward the deck, the first hints of sunlight gradually began to illuminate the stairwell.

Kazuya ran, Victorique's small body in his arms. She stared intently at the brass knuckles on Kazuya's hands, sticky with Ned's blood, as if looking upon something wholly unexpected to her.

Julie hurried up the stairs after them, her axe gripped in both hands. With an anguished look on her face, she turned, not to Kazuya, but to Victorique, and asked, "How did you know he wasn't dead?"

"Now isn't that time to be discussing that sort of thing," began Kazuya, but when he noticed her pale, desperate expression, he stopped himself.

Victorique frowned slightly, then spoke in her usual tone of voice, sounding utterly relaxed in comparison to the dire situation they found themselves in. "It's really quite simple. An overflowing wellspring of wisdom told it to me."

"Please, Victorique, in plain language."

"Ugh..." she groaned, and nodded reluctantly. "It's very simple. Didn't the way Ned collapsed look very unnatural to you? He was lying face down and hiding his right hand under his body, as if he didn't want anyone to touch it. And then his left hand was pointing towards us in the opposite position, almost like a command for us to take his pulse."

"Well, now that you mention it...."

"Is that the way someone would collapse when they fall blindly into a trap? A more natural posture would have both arms reaching forward. The strange position he was in should've immediately grabbed your attention."

“But he had no pulse. I’m sure of it,” said Kazuya.

“He’s right,” murmured Julie softly. Her face was as pallid as a corpse, and her lips were quivering almost imperceptibly. And then she whispered, as if talking to herself, “It’s the same as back then. He had no pulse; I was sure of it...”

“...’Back then?’”

“N-no, nothing. Do go on, little detective.”

To be addressed in such a way caused Victorique to sniff in displeasure. “It is possible to stop one’s pulse temporarily.”

“How?”

“By holding something in your armpit. ...For example, a tennis ball.”

Kazuya and Julie cried out and looked at each other, blinking in surprise.

“No wonder...” Kazuya remembered how Ned had been constantly playing with a tennis ball. If he held that ball under his arm, and squeezed it tightly enough....

“He was able to stop his pulse temporarily so that he could trick the person who checked it into believing he was dead. I called you over, Kujou, once I realized that.”

“When you said you were scared and wanted him by your side, you mean?” Julie asked teasingly.

Victorique blushed suddenly, then scowled. “I wasn’t really scared. I just had to say something like that to get this third son of an imperial soldier to move.”

“Stop calling me that.”

“Oh, then would you rather I call you the exceptional third son of an imperial soldier?”

“...Ugh! You’re annoying me, seriously annoying me!”

As Julie watched the two of them stay close to each other, and no matter how much they bickered, never pulling apart, a lonesome look entered her eyes....

three

[3]

The three of them emerged onto the deck. Dawn was breaking, and the pale morning sun was starting to shine on the damp wooden planks of the deck. The rain that had poured down so heavily at night had turned to drizzle, but still showed no signs of stopping. Waves towered ominously in the dark sea.

The radio room beckoned them like a lonely chalet in the mountains. Victorique slipped every few steps on the slick wooden planks, throwing Kazuya into a panic each time she fell.

Just as the two of them had reached the door of the radio room, they heard Julie, running after them, let out a high-pitched scream.

Kazuya spun around in time to glimpse a man's muscular arm reach out from behind Julie and grab her long black hair.

...It was Ned Baxter.

"Nooo!" Julie screamed again.

Ned Baxter's face, with eyes blood-shot and mouth wide open, had warped into the visage of a malevolent beast in a child's nightmare. He wrapped his hands around Julie's neck, and she let out an agonized scream that reverberated around the deck. The axe in her hand tumbled to the ground.

Ned threw Julie's limp body across the deck and strode toward Kazuya and Victorique.

"V-Victorique, over here!" Kazuya yanked on Victorique, who was rooted to the deck in terror, and dragged her to the radio room, losing their footing on the slippery planks over and over along the way. He opened the door, pushed her in, then tried to close it after her. But Victorique's small hand snaked out and tugged on Kazuya.

“Victorique, you stay in here! Call for help on the radio!”

“Kujou, what about you...?”

“I have to stop him. He’ll kill you!”

“Kujou...”

“I’m the one...” Kazuya began haltingly, his whole body trembling at the sight of Ned, the “hound,” slowly approaching. “I’m the one who brought you here. It’s my responsibility to get you home safely.”

“No!” Victorique cried out, her voice quivering, her eyes filled with anguish. She had so many things she wanted to say, but didn’t have the words to express them.... Confronted with her own inadequacy for the first time, she opened her mouth over and over in search of the right words, only to close it again helplessly when she came up empty.

At last, after much effort, she recovered her ability to speak.

“Kujou... I wanted to come here. I found the invitation, and made you—”

“No! It’s my fault.”

“Be rational about this. Who really bears the responsibility?”

“Th-that has nothing to do with it!” Kazuya stamped the floor in frustration. Victorique gave the floor some repeated stamps of her own as if in imitation.

Finally, Kazuya said, “Listen, it’s my duty to save you, as the third son of an imperial soldier...” Those words suddenly began to feel like a curse. He knew that there was no way they could be enough to express his true feelings to Victorique. They would only end up talking across each other, just like before.

“...No, that’s not it. That’s not what I want to say.” Kazuya gathered up his courage and spoke from his heart. “I just want to save you.”

Victorique’s face crumpled. She parted her lips sorrowfully,

preparing to speak.

Kazuya started to force the door closed.

Victorique no longer wore the cool, cynical, aloof expression that marked her as an aristocrat—the only face she ever allowed others to see. She had lost the invisible veil that separated her from the world. What was left was only the face of the young girl that she truly was, overcome with insecurity.

...Kazuya set his weight against the door, pushing even harder.

The last glimpse he caught of her was of those green eyes, fearful like a lost puppy.

“K-Kujou...” Her voice was so soft that he could barely hear it. “Kujou, I’m begging you.... Don’t leave me. Let’s go home together. I don’t want to be alone! Oh, Kujou!”

Kazuya closed his eyes, and slammed the door shut.

The very next moment, the hound rushed at him.

Kazuya clenched his fists with their brass knuckles, readying himself. He mentally reviewed the hand-to-hand fighting techniques that his older brothers had taught him from time to time when he lived on that far eastern island. They had taught him very enthusiastically, and Kazuya was confident in his ability to remember what he had learned. That was how he had done so well in school.

Kazuya drew back his fist, and punched Ned’s nose with all his strength. The punch made contact with Ned’s face, causing him to stagger slightly. Ned rubbed his palm from top to bottom over his face. Once he dropped his hand, his lips curled into a peculiar smile. Kazuya shuddered at the sight of it, and punched Ned again with even more ferocity, as if trying to drive away something terrifying. His fists landed with a dull thump. Blood streamed from Ned’s nose, and he again wiped his hand over his face, smearing his palm with the sticky redness.

The second Ned saw the blood on his hand, one of his eyebrows

began to twitch. He was angry.

Suddenly, Ned jumped off the ground, lunging toward Kazuya. Ned landed on top of him, slamming him against the deck, then straddled him and began to punch his face over and over again. Kazuya's vision grew blurry.

It's the same as before, he thought to himself—that time when he was forced to grovel, trembling, on the tatami of that dojo.

Even so... back then, Kazuya's brothers were the ones waiting for him, and they were much older and stronger than he was. But this time was different. He was in a foreign country far away from home, alone in a distant land with a little girl who had become his friend. If Kazuya lost, two lives would disappear so easily from the face of the earth, leaving nothing behind but a dispassionate end-title.

Kazuya gritted his teeth, struggling to stay conscious. He waited for a gap between Ned's blows, and then shot his fist into the air, managing to strike Ned's face several times.

Strangely enough, he didn't feel out of breath. For a moment, he wondered why, then suddenly stumbled on the reason: lately he had been going up and down that labyrinthine staircase at St. Marguerite's Library on a daily basis. Victorique had mocked him for it, saying that he needed the exercise... but perhaps he had in fact slightly increased his level of physical strength without realizing it.

Ned's head flew backwards with each one of Kazuya's punches. But no matter how many times his head bobbed back, it always stubbornly returned. Ned's face was covered in blood, looking less like a human than a ghastly red lump.

Kazuya kept on punching him over and over again. Then Ned wrapped his arm around his neck and applied pressure. Kazuya started to feel faint. *I can't lose.... I won't lose!*

But Ned had the strength of an adult man, and as he tightened his grip around his throat, Kazuya's body began to grow slack.

Victo ... riche...!

Kazuya opened his eyes. All he could see was white. He clenched his teeth and punched Ned's temple as hard as he could. Ned's grip around his neck instantly loosened. Kazuya opened his eyes again and began to take ragged breaths, his vision gradually returning to him. He stood up and stumbled back a few paces to lean against the deck railing. Ned also stood up, staggering toward Kazuya, his face bloody.

A shadow appeared behind Ned. Kazuya rubbed his eyes at the sight.

...It was Julie. She had regained consciousness, and was stealthily inching their way. Clutching the axe with one hand, she locked eyes with Kazuya, motioning him to be silent with a finger to her lips. Kazuya gave a slight nod.

Ned raised his fist again, and started to swing it down on Kazuya's head.

But that same second...

Kazuya crouched down and dipped between Ned's legs, smoothly slipping behind him. Ned stumbled forward, unable to stop the momentum of his punch once his target had suddenly disappeared. Julie lifted the axe and drove it into his back with all her might. The axe sank into Ned's back at an angle. He howled like an injured animal. Julie released her shaking hands from the axe handle.

Before Ned could turn around, Kazuya wrapped his arms around his legs and lifted them up high. Ned screamed as his body was flipped over. With the axe still embedded into his back, he fell head first over the railing into the sea.

Kazuya ran up to the railing and looked down into the water.

Ned's body hit the water with a loud splash, and tall waves soon came to claim him. Billows of white foam bubbled to the surface. After two or three waves cascaded past, Ned was already gone, vanished to the bottom of the sea.

Julie walked up to the railing, her shoulders heaving. "Thanks, kid."

"No, I should be the one thanking you."

"Good job." Julie smiled weakly.

White waves ebbed and flowed around the ship. The ocean at daybreak was quiet. Kazuya and Julie stood against the railing silently, staring down at where the dark sea had devoured Ned.

Victorique was in the radio room, transmitting an SOS to the coast guard. Her small body sitting in front of the large square machine looked more like a doll that someone had placed there as a joke. Only her pallid face and the quick movements of her hands belied her doll-like impression.

The door opened. Victorique's shoulders jumped.

Once she saw that it was Kazuya who entered the room, she looked so relieved that she could cry ... at least for an moment. It didn't take long for her to assume the calm and slightly acerbic look she always wore as an aristocrat. "...It appears that you're safe."

But when Julie was next to come inside, for some reason Victorique's expression turned wary.

This went unnoticed by Julie, who cheerfully asked her, "Did you call for help?"

"Of course I did. They should be coming soon. By the way..." Victorique shrugged, scowling. "We don't seem to have traveled very far from the harbor. They found it strange that we could have gotten stranded so close to land. It was rather difficult to explain this to them on the radio."

Then Victorique stood up, and with dainty steps, walked up to Kazuya, who was removing the brass knuckles from his hands. She looked like a tiny, exquisite doll that had suddenly started to walk on its own. But as proof that this was no doll, there was an indescribable expression on her face, akin to relief, worry, and a

kind of transparent emotion.

Victorique silently took Kazuya's hands in her own, and squeezed them tightly.

four

[4]

A few minutes after the rescue party ushered Kazuya, Julie, and Victorique to safety aboard their ship...

The *Queen Berry* sank into the sea with a loud groan. It was a spectacular sight. But once the large ship finished slowly settling beneath the waters, and the waves it stirred up had vanished, only the quiet sea remained, almost as if nothing else had been there from the start.

Unlike the *Queen Berry*, the rescue ship was a plain and stout vessel. The deck looked well-worn, and the paint on the railing was peeling and splotchy.

From the group of rescue workers emerged two young men in rabbit-skin hunting caps, men who were, strangely enough, holding hands. These could only be the deputies of Inspector Gréville de Blois. Shouting, with faces pale, they rushed over to Kazuya and Victorique. When they saw that Victorique was safe, they began yelling excitedly.

“Thank God! You’re alive! It’s a miracle!”

“Wow, the ship sank! I never expected that! Oh, my God!”

Victorique leaned against the deck railing and gazed out into the sea. Strong gusts of wind from the ocean whipped the thin threads of her long, lustrous blond hair. The white lace of her finely-tailored dress was soiled and frayed. Her eyes were forlorn.

Kazuya stood next to her. “What are you looking at?” he asked.

Victorique raised her head, and smiled faintly. Then she brought her lips close to Kazuya’s ear as if about to tell him a carefully guarded secret, and whispered, “I don’t dislike beautiful things.”

And then she pointed with her small finger at the breaking waves, which blazed scarlet in reflection of the morning sun. The rain had finally stopped, allowing the sun to surround the ship in dazzling light. The powerful rays that stained the sea in such vivid redness bathed the two of them in the same radiance.

Kazuya realized that this marked the first time his tiny golden lady friend had ever expressed to him her likes or dislikes. He smiled, feeling as though she had let him in on something special.

They stood by each other, watching the scenery.

At last, Kazuya said softly, "Let's do this again."

"...Again?"

"Yeah. Let's come see the sea again, just the two of us."

Victorique's smile bore a hint of loneliness. "Again, huh..."

"Hmm?"

"Nothing, Kujou. Nothing at all...."

As the sun rose slowly into the sky, the blinding red glare shifted into a softer glow.

The ship steadily approached land.

And the waves continued to gently break along the shore.

five

[5]

Julie Guile stepped off the ship with her head bowed, trying to look inconspicuous. She walked faster and faster, finally breaking into a run away from the ship.

No wonder, she murmured silently.

Countless vessels were arriving at the port, and throngs of people were disembarking. The shouts of dockworkers unloading cargo and of bustling sailors hard at work filled the air. There were travelers departing on transoceanic voyages, accompanied by their families who had come to see them off. Porters were carrying luggage on and off the ships. The air was alive with the clamor of a typical morning at the docks.

Julie blended in unnoticed among the hubbub, attempting to disappear into the crowd. The policemen had told her not to leave, of course, but she had no intention of listening to them. She slipped into the morning crush of people, walking briskly away. Now that she had left the ship, the woman known as Julie Guile existed no more. All she needed to do was escape into the city, and she wouldn't be found again.

But Julie didn't notice the men trailing her—two men holding hands, skipping along, wearing matching rabbit-skin hunting caps. As she walked, she murmured to herself, “No wonder. You did that back then, too, didn't you....”

Tears blurred her vision.

Her memories came rushing back.

No, “memory” was too kind of a word.

It was a nightmare. A night like a bad dream...

Isn't that right, Huey? You tricked us....

A hound released into a drove of hares—Huey, or rather, Ned Baxter...

So that's how you played dead back then!

monologue four

I slipped the heart-shaped pendant that I found in the stairwell into my pocket, and stood up, going back down the stairs again to return to the hallway.

As I made my way down, I had no inkling of what was about to happen.

The next thing I heard was the sound of a gunshot in the distance, followed by several screams.

I broke into a run down the stairs, and jumped into the gloomy, spartan hallway. The sight that I beheld there was so shocking that I was instantly rooted to the spot.

“...Huey!?”

I saw my companions lying in a pile on the floor of the hallway. The petite French girl was collapsed on top of Ree as if shielding her. The sturdily-built Italian boy was backed up against the wall, staring dumbly at the blood gushing from his shoulder. The thin, curly-haired American boy was lying face up, moaning. Yang, bleeding from his arm, stood in front of him.

And amidst all the chaos stood a slender boy...

...Huey, who should have been dead.

I inadvertently let out a cry. Huey heard me, and slowly turned in my direction. I gasped. His pallid face was completely expressionless. He looked like some terrifying marionette, moving not by his own will, but more like he was being manipulated by some powerful force.

“I found a hare!” he murmured. Then he suddenly grinned.

Huey casually held a machine gun in his hand as if it came naturally to him. I guessed that he had snatched it off the two boys

who drowned.

Which meant... those boys' last words....

I saw a ghost!

It took our gun, and threw us in here!

That “ghost” must have been Huey, who we thought was dead.

And now my companions lay bleeding on the ground.

The blood rushed to my head. I took out the pistol that was jammed into my pocket, and aimed it at Huey's chest.

“Put down the gun, Huey!”

“...You first.” He smiled and pulled the trigger.

A hot blast penetrated through my right shoulder. By the time I realized that I had been shot, I was already on my knees. The gun in my hand fell to the floor. Sweat beaded up on my forehead, and chills ran through my body.

Huey slowly walked up to me, his face cheerful. He pointed the gun at my head, and then...

“...Stop!” a boy cried out.

As blood coursed down his arm, Yang jumped up and wedged his body in between me and Huey. In a voice trembling with anger, he shouted, “I don't understand why you're doing this.... But you don't point your gun at girls!”

“That doesn't matter. In this box, whether you're a boy or a girl makes no difference at all.” Huey's voice was also trembling. His eyes anxiously shifted from side to side, seemingly fearful of something. “The only thing that's important is your nationality, not your sex.”

“...What do you mean?”

"I'm working with them. You're the hares, and I'm the hound who was released in your midst. I was given orders to hunt you down. This is for the sake of my country. And I'll carry out my duty to the bitter end!"

"Huey...?"

Confronted by the piteous look on his face, and the enigmatic words he kept repeating, all I could do was stare up at him in confusion.

Huey lifted his machine gun. "What happens here is the future. And there's nothing anyone can do about it!"

Yang lunged at Huey.

The muzzle of the gun hit against Yang's chest. Huey pulled the trigger.

Yang's slight body was blown across the hallway, splashing my face with a spray of blood. Huey shot him at point-blank range, opening up a large hole in his chest. His light frame hit the floor with an unexpectedly loud thud. Blood streamed from his torso, staining the old, blackened carpet bright red in the blink of an eye. I screamed.

Huey pointed the gun at me. He grinned, then parted his thin lips, and ordered me, "Beg for your life."

I glared up at him. There was no change in his expression.

"...No."

"Then die!"

The gun came closer. I shut my eyes.

I heard the click of the trigger being pulled.

I opened my eyes.

He was out of bullets. I quickly grabbed my gun off the floor with my left hand.

Huey turned around and took off running.

I aimed at his back and pulled the trigger. Several loud gunshots rang out in the hallway. But I missed every time. I was getting shaky from blood loss.

Suddenly, I realized that I was crying. As I pulled the trigger over and over again, tears clouded my eyesight, and my shoulders shook from the sobs.

I looked at Yang's corpse, then got up and staggered over to the other children. The American and Italian boys had been shot in their side and shoulder, but their wounds were superficial, and when I called out to them, they were able to stumble to their feet. The French girl had merely fainted from overwhelming terror.

The three of us went over to Ree, who had lost consciousness from blood loss, and propped her up. I still had her pendant in my pocket. I had to give it to her, I thought to myself. We started walking again.

The American boy was swaying unsteadily. The Italian boy began telling him about his hometown, trying to encourage him to keep walking. His words sounded so jarringly out of place.

"I used to live close to the market. I earned some pocket money by helping the sellers set up in the morning. My favorite stalls had vegetables that came in every color. I thought we must have the most beautiful and delicious summer vegetables in the world...."

The American boy smiled feebly in response.

Then the French girl suddenly moaned, "Why...?"

The rest of us turned to her.

She wondered out loud, her voice faltering, "Why was he still alive? That boy ... should've been dead...."

No one replied.

We didn't know why.

I went over those memories over and over in my head, like one driven mad. How could Huey still be alive, when I was so sure that he had no pulse....

one

chapter five — game, set

[1]

Julie Guile walked away from the port and hailed a horse-drawn carriage. Once inside, the unsteady movement rattled her body, and her long black hair fluttered in the wind, alternating between sticking to her pallid face and flying away from it.

Julie sat alone, jostled around in her seat, her eyes deep in thought.

“It makes sense now....” she whispered absentmindedly. “I was the one who took Huey’s pulse after he collapsed. I was certain that it was stopped, and that he looked dead. All this time, I’ve wondered how he did that....”

The view outside the window gradually turned into a dense urban scene. Among the crowds of people, Julie was feeling more and more secure. Her revenge was finally complete, and it was time to escape.

The coachman called out to her in a cheerful voice, almost hysterically so: “Nice weather today, miss.”

Julie ignored him.

He doggedly continued, “Sure was cloudy earlier. Looks like it’ll be a nice day today.”

“...Yeah,” Julie muttered. She narrowed her eyes.

Then she thought of Victorique, and a smile peeked out from the corners of her mouth. That strange but beautiful girl probably didn’t realize it herself, but it had taken her no more than an instant to answer the question that Julie had asked herself over and over again for the past ten years.

Julie remembered finding that tennis ball on the floor where Huey's body should have been. He must have played dead back then by using the same trick. That had terrorized the children, and was one of the reasons that they ended up turning on each other. And after he left the group, he robbed them of their lives with his dangerous pranks.

"It's all clear to me now...." Julie squeezed the heart-shaped pendant that dangled on her chest.

But she had executed the perfect revenge. The adults who had imprisoned the hares inside the box and tortured them to death were now gone, along with the boy who acted as their hound. The story had finally come to a close. Now all she had to do was escape ... the further, the better.

...Suddenly, Julie realized that something was amiss.

The carriage wasn't heading toward the train station from where she planned to leave the country, but was instead turning around a different corner. The station faded into the distance. Flustered, Julie shouted at the coachman, "Where are you going?!"

"...Where are you going, miss?" the coachman repeated. He was a young and handsome man with aristocratic features and lips that curved into a mocking smile. His body was wrapped in an overcoat far too elegant for a mere coachman, and an expensive silk tie was coiled around his neck.

"Who the hell are you!?" yelled Julie, transfixed by the coachman's strange hairstyle—one she had never seen before, swept forward and hardened into a point.

"My name is Gréville."

"...Gréville who?"

"The famed detective."

"Excuse me?"

The man yanked on the reins, causing the horses to whinny and

come to a stop.

At the same time, Julie heard the sound of running footsteps. She gulped. Before she knew it, dozens of policemen were descending on the carriage from all directions.

Julie looked outside. They were in front of the police station, a squarish structure lined with many rectangular windows covered by iron bars. This building, reminiscent of a prison, possessed a long and infamous history, and the mere sight of it was enough to intimidate someone. The faded orange brick walls seemed to be slowly closing in on her.

Julie peered at the front of the building. A boy and girl were standing there with linked hands, staring back at her—that Oriental boy Kazuya Kujou, who had called himself the third son of an imperial soldier, and that thoroughly blue-blooded girl with golden hair, Victorique, whom Julie privately referred to as the little detective.

Julie shrugged. Then she faced the coachman and smiled. “I guess this is game, set?”

“...You said it.”

The coachman jumped out of the carriage, opened the door from the outside, and courteously offered a hand to Julie. His aggressively pointed hair nearly struck Julie in the face. As she took his hand and stepped outside, the coachman puffed his chest out and proclaimed, “Julie Guile, you are under arrest for the crime of murder!”

For a moment, Julie smiled.

Then she set off walking toward the police station, an icy expression on her face.

two

[2]

In a room in the police station, Julie Guile sat before Inspector de Blois, Victorique, and Kazuya. The inspector's two deputies were shut outside for some reason, and they stood in front of the door, holding hands.

This station was not under Inspector de Blois' jurisdiction, but once he had received word from Victorique, he commandeered the station as if it were under his own control, making use of the influence he wielded thanks to his privileged background.

The room was darkened, and uncomfortably large. A long, bare table had been placed in the middle of the room, under lighting that consisted of a single naked light bulb strung from the ceiling. The plain wooden chairs that each person occupied made an unpleasant squeaking sound with even the slightest movement.

Julie sat in her chair, a look of bewilderment on her face. She turned to Victorique and asked, "How did you know I was behind everything?"

With almost simultaneous movements, Victorique and the inspector withdrew a pipe from each of their bags and put it in their mouths. After they lit the fire and inhaled, Victorique blew a mouthful of smoke at Julie, and the inspector did the same to Victorique, each while staring at the other person.

"...A wellspring of wisdom," Victorique replied coolly. Once she realized that Julie, the inspector, and Kazuya were watching her closely, she impatiently ran a hand through her long blond hair, and added, "So you want an explanation. First of all, you lied at the beginning."

"...I lied? Me?" Julie blinked in surprise.

Victorique nodded, and looked up at her. "When you introduced

yourself. Julie Guile, the daughter of a rich man, ‘raised in the lap of luxury in a huge mansion’.”

Kazuya asked curiously, “How did you know she was lying?”

“Do you remember, Kujou? Whenever this woman is deep in thought, she has this habit.” Victorique stood up and started walking, while at the same time pretending to be fingering a pendant on her chest. She took five steps, then turned and took another five steps, then turned again. After going back and forth several times, she looked up. “...See?”

“See ... what exactly?”

When she realized the other three were looking back at her with blank expressions, Victorique said irritably, “Think about it for a minute. Is this the behavior of someone who was raised in the lap of luxury in a huge mansion?”

“What do you mean?”

“This is the habit of someone who spent a long time in an enclosed space—a space where you would bump into the wall after five paces.”

“...As in, she had a small bedroom?”

“That may be the case, but I’m thinking of a much narrower kind of space.” Victorique returned to her seat, then spoke in her low, husky voice. “For example, solitary confinement in a prison, or a hospital room. The attic of a mansion. People who aren’t allowed to go outside for a long time will tend to end up like that.”

For some reason, Inspector de Blois suddenly shifted his body uncomfortably and cleared his throat.

Victorique gave him a sidelong glance, and added quietly, “I am only speaking in generalities here, Gréville. There’s no hidden meaning in it.”

The inspector didn’t reply.

Victorique continued, "I'm grateful for being granted permission to go outside."

"...."

Kazuya looked back and forth between Victorique and the inspector, puzzled by the peculiar atmosphere.

Victorique turned to Julie. "You misrepresented yourself. And there's another important thing. You were carrying a weapon from the very beginning."

Kazuya gave a start. "A weapon?"

"Yes. When Maurice found the gun and was about to shoot us, she took out her own pistol, and shot him dead instead. At the time, she said that she'd just happened to find the gun along the way, but that too was a lie."

"How did you know?"

"The weight of her handbag." Victorique pointed at Julie's bag. "When we first met in the lounge, this bag was very heavy. Kujou, do you remember what a loud thump it made when it hit you on the head?"

"Yeah, of course."

"She was already carrying the gun by then. That's why her bag was so heavy. And after she used the gun and threw it away, she accidentally dropped that bag, and I picked it up."

"Oh, I remember that...." Kazuya thought of how she had picked up the bag and thrown it at Julie. It seemed to be very light, and almost floated through the air....

"Although Ned Baxter tried to kill us, it doesn't mean that he was the culprit. He was likely another one of the men involved in that incident ten years ago. He believed, the same as Maurice, that one of us was a former hare who had planned this scenario of revenge, and he was secretly frightened. So he decided to kill us before we killed him."

The room fell dead silent.

At last, Julie nodded. “You’re right.” Her expression was oddly cheerful, as if to be caught and have her crimes revealed came as a relief to her. Speaking in an extremely matter-of-fact tone, she said, “I did it. I prepared the ship; I wrote the invitations. I planned to kill everyone and sink the ship. But I never expected that Roxane would die beforehand, and that you two would come on board in her stead, even though you have nothing to do with any of this. It threw me off guard. I couldn’t let you get killed, so I was feeling anxious the whole time.”

She smiled wanly. “As I observed you, it reminded me of the past. There was a Chinese boy named Yang. He was calm and kind, and I depended on him. But in the end, Ned Baxter killed him.... When I look at you, Kujou, I think of him.”

“Can you tell us the story of what happened ten years ago?” interrupted Inspector de Blois.

Julie nodded. “Very well.”

And so, Julie Guile began her story.

One night, ten years ago, she was snatched off the streets and thrown onto a black carriage encircled with iron bars. She woke up on a ship—the real *Queen Berry*, along with all the other boys and girls. And then her nightmare began.

The other children died one by one, betrayed by Huey. She and her wounded friends made their way up to the deck.

And when they had arrived, what the surviving hares found was....

monologue five

We ran through the flooded hallway and climbed up the forward stairs toward the deck.

Ree was feeling heavier and heavier on my back. My knees shook with every step I took up the staircase. But I had to keep carrying her. The two boys who had been shot by Huey looked sickly from blood loss, and the girl was crying from shock. If I didn't carry Ree myself, she would get left behind.

Ree lay so heavily against my back that I couldn't tell if she was dead or alive. I felt her black hair rustling from side to side as I walked up the stairs. I looked down and saw that her smooth chocolate-brown skin was sapped of its healthy color.

At last, we arrived at the deck.

The sun was rising.

When we had gone to the stern-side of the deck last night, it was shrouded in deep darkness and we couldn't see a thing. But now a pale dawn light from the eastern sky was shining onto the deck. Waves silently washed over the grey sea.

We crept to the radio room with unsteady legs.

And when we opened the door....

White smoke floated up to the ceiling of the room, obscuring our view like fog.

As we entered the room, covered in blood, the people inside—nine adult men—turned to us at the same time. Some of them were playing card games, while others smoked cigars, and yet others were reading books.

Strands of white smoke from their cigars snaked upward to the ceiling.

The men stared at us, open-mouthed. Then they suddenly shouted all at once, "Where are you from?!"

"Give us your nationality! Who are the ones who died?!"

"All right, this one's from Sauvure! Who are your allies?!"

They grabbed our shoulders and shook us violently.

One man stood up, a glass of brandy in hand. Out of the group of men, he seemed to be one of the younger ones, around his mid-thirties. He took the arm of one of the older men, and said, "Now, now, first things first. Why don't we give them our thanks?"

"Maurice..."

The man he addressed as Maurice stood there, looking down on us as we stood there staring at him, stupefied. Then he raised his arms and put his hands together to clap.

"Let's give a warm welcome to our brave hares!"

The rest of the men joined him and began clapping, faces aglow with smile after smile.

I felt like I was losing my mind.

The strength left my arms, and Ree's body slid from my back down to the floor. I cried out, "Ree!" and crouched down, and one of the men looked our way. He seemed to take note of Ree's black hair and chocolate-colored skin, and gave a snort. "Arab, huh."

And then he kicked Ree's limp body, right in front of my disbelieving eyes.

I shrieked.

Ree was motionless. She might really be dead this time.

I put a hand in my pocket and tightly squeezed the heart-shaped pendant that I had planned to give to her. Tears spilled down my cheeks.

The men glared at us. “So the English one is still alive?”

“Of course. That’s our hound. He already came back to us.”

“Then what’s left is ... France, Italy, America ... and Sauvure.”

They turned to each other and nodded.

At the back of the room, I saw an eerie figure sitting in a wheelchair, her head covered by a red linen cloth. Wrinkled eyelids sagged, leaving her eyes half-hooded.

It was an old woman.

Jars of silver, copper, and glass were placed in front of her. Her withered hand clutched a glittering gold mirror.

“A youth will soon die....” Her voice was low.

The men turned to the old woman. “Lady Roxane!”

“This death shall be the beginning of everything. The earth will tumble like a falling stone.”

All activity in the room ceased.

The old woman, Roxane, cried out, “As the oracle says, so it shall be done. Carry this out, and your nation shall prosper.”

The men voiced their assent, and lowered their heads reverently.

I stood there motionless, my thoughts in turmoil. *The oracle...? What is she talking about...?*

Finally, the old woman shook her head and smiled, then proclaimed in her husky voice, “This concludes the running of the hares. Now let the box be sunk! And fatten up the hares!”

one

chapter six — I'll never let go of your hand

[1]

Back at the police station, Julie had finished with her long testimony.

The room fell silent.

Two slender stalks of white smoke wound their way up to the ceiling from the ceramic pipes held in Victorique's and Inspector de Blois' hands. No one spoke a word.

Finally, Julie said in a low voice, "I never understood it. I agonized over it. But you, Victorique, dear little detective girl. You understand, don't you?"

Kazuya looked up at Julie. She was biting her lip, staring straight at Victorique. Then he glanced at Victorique. It looked like she had completed her reconstruction of chaos, and was pondering how to articulate it.

Inspector de Blois, on the other hand, had apparently reached the limits of his brain capacity, and was gazing idly at some sparrows flying outside the window. The pointed tip of his spiraled blond hair gleamed golden in the pale morning light. He took the pipe from his mouth and started absentmindedly flicking the strand of white smoke to and fro, as if his mind had flown far away.

Victorique parted her lips and began to speak in slow, deliberate tones. "It was likely meant to be an act of divination performed on a massive scale."

"...Divination?!" cried out Julie. She shook her head. "But so many people died. And the ship sank. What on earth do you mean? What were they trying to divine? How? It must have cost a fortune to do something like that."

“Kujou, I believe I’ve explained this to you before.”

Finding himself suddenly called upon, Kazuya jumped up in his seat. “Wh-what?”

“About ancient fortune-telling. The staff divination performed by the prophet Moses.”

“Oh... I think I remember you telling me something like that.”

“In order to divine which tribe the next leader of the Israelites would come from, he arranged twelve staffs, each written with the name of one of the tribes. The fate of each staff foretold the fate of that tribe.”

“Yeah...”

“So the fortune-teller Roxane raised hares in her garden. But she sometimes gave them to her hound for hunting. Some hares died, and some survived. The surviving ones were fattened up and carefully tended to.” Victorique paused.

Julie’s expression was growing steadily darker.

“Roxane was probably using the hares for her fortune-telling. Each one was labeled with the name of a person or thing whose fate it was supposed to represent, and then they were released together with the hound. Whichever hare survived would be a prediction of the future.”

“Are you saying that we were those hares...?”

Victorique nodded.

“But why? We’re human!”

“I suppose they determined that they would need a prediction of the future on a far greater scale than any fortune-telling they had ever attempted before. ...Now, here we have several fragments of chaos to use as our ingredients. The orphans taken from eleven countries around the world. Roxane’s words: ‘A youth will soon die. That shall be the beginning of everything. The world will tumble

like a falling stone.’ And the words of the man who asked, ‘Who are your allies?’ And also what Huey said: ‘What happens here is the future.’ ‘What’s important is your nationality.’” Victorique lowered her voice. “And the fact that this happened ten years ago—in the spring of 1914.”

“Oh!” Kazuya cried out.

Everyone turned to look at him.

Kazuya stuttered, “Uh, no... Sorry. It’s just that when you mentioned how it happened ten years ago, I remembered that the Sarajevo Incident happened that year in June, and that’s when the Great War started. But I guess it’s just a coincidence.”

“No, it isn’t. That’s your answer.”

“What do you mean?!” Julie shouted.

At the end of June in the year 1914, the heir to the Austrian throne was assassinated in Sarajevo. When Austria requested the extradition of the suspects, the Serbian government refused, and other countries pledged their support. Austria, Hungary, and Germany joined forces, and the war began. Italy, America, and other countries also stepped up to fight them, until finally the war had spread over the entire face of the earth....

Victorique softly continued, “I can only guess at the events that took place. Officials in the government probably sensed a certain portentous mood running through the current of the times, and decided to ask a famous fortune-teller to look into the future. They set up a grand stage—the box known to us as the *Queen Berry*—filled it with traps, and set loose hares gathered from the corners of the world. They also unleashed an English boy to play the role of hunting dog. In that box, each child shouldered the burden of his own nation’s future.”

“My God...!”

“And the divination came true.” Victorique ran her fingers through her golden hair. “Think back to the time of the Great War. Hey,

Kujou, you half-witted savant.”

“...Don’t call me that!”

“Tell us the result of the war.”

Unsure of where this was going, Kazuya began haltingly, “The Great War started between the Central Powers and the Allies, and, um, it ended with an Allied victory. The Central Powers consisted of ... Germany, Austria, Hungary, also the Ottoman Empire...”

“What countries were on the Allied side, Kujou?”

“Um... France, Italy, England, America, plus Sauvure....”

Victorique stared intently at Julie, her eyes completely devoid of expression. Julie was biting her lip tightly, seemingly beset by violently conflicting emotions. “My God...”

“The fortune came true.”

Julie was silent.

“The children on that ship were divided into two groups: the Central Powers, and the Allies. First, the Hungarian girl died in a trap, and then the Turkish boy was shot to death. And the English boy deceived you all so he could survive. Yes, England played the role of a trickster in the war. The German and Austrian boys both died, and the Chinese boy was also shot and killed. And the Arab girl...”

“Ree...!”

“The Ottoman Empire was dragged into the war, lost its territory, and was torn apart.”

Julie wept.

Victorique watched her, a slightly perturbed expression on her face. She took a clearly expensive-looking handkerchief from her pocket, and timidly handed it to Julie.

Julie accepted it, and dabbed at her tears. Victorique's face took on a faintly relieved look.

Through her sniffles, Julie said, "Then you're saying ... they used our actions as a basis for their political decisions."

"Yes." Victorique nodded. "Sauvure participated in the Great War on the side of the Allies. This changed the course of history. I don't know how much of it was coincidence, and how much was inevitable. Now that Roxane and the others involved are dead, we'll never know. But it still came true. Of course, I don't mean in an objective sense, but rather in a subjective one. It is very clear to me that they... the politicians, the elites, and the diplomats, all of them used the result of their grand divination, the 'running of the hares,' as a device to shirk responsibility for their actions."

Julie raised her head. "How cruel."

And then she slowly began to describe what had happened to her next. Unable to recover from the shock, she spent a long time in a sanatorium. Once she'd finally recuperated, she left the hospital and began trying to investigate what had taken place.

After that night on the ship, Julie never got the chance to see the others alive again. One of the surviving children had committed suicide, and another became a murderer and had been executed. She didn't know if Ree was alive or dead, and could only assume that she had died on board the ship.

But one of the children, Huey, had changed his name to Ned Baxter, and was leading a carefree life. When Julie found a newspaper article about his activities as an actor on the stage, she decided to include him among her targets for revenge.

And now, ten years later...

Julie was wealthy thanks to the command to "fatten the hares." She exhausted her resources to construct the replica of the box, the *Queen Berry*, then sent the invitations.

All of the characters were assembled, save for Roxane, who had

already been killed.

Despite the grim nature of the story being told, the atmosphere in the room was remarkably calm and quiet. Perhaps it was because of how silently Julie herself sat in her chair as she spoke.

She looked up at Victorique. “Hey... When did you realize that I was the one behind everything?”

For a moment, Victorique was silent. Then she said, “I confirmed it when you shot Maurice. But I first started suspecting you when we woke up in the lounge.”

Julie was dumbfounded. “Why?”

“You were right next to the door of the lounge. And when you tried to open the door, you made a big show of rattling the doorknob and announcing that it was locked. But later on when another man tried to open the door, it opened for him effortlessly. And then he was shot by the arrow and killed.”

“Yes.”

“That door was never locked in the first place. You only made a fuss about it being locked because you were trying to keep us inside the room. You wanted to rip off the wallpaper and show us that message, so that everyone would know exactly what sort of ritual you were trying to perform. And only afterwards were you planning to kill them, right?”

“...That’s right.” Julie stared closely at Victorique’s small face.

Victorique looked away. “But I had no proof. At that point, all I had was a hunch.”

“Oh.” Julie giggled, then pointed at Kazuya. “Hey, little detective girl. Now I know why you held onto this boy’s hand so tightly. It’s because you saw him acting friendly with me, not knowing that I was the culprit.”

“Hmph...”

“No matter how many mean things you said to him, you never let go of his hand. You must’ve been worried sick about him.”

Victorique pretended not to hear this.

Kazuya stared in surprise at Julie and Victorique, and thought about the time when they were fleeing through the ship. He’d held onto Victorique’s hand out of a desire to protect her, but maybe Victorique had been concerned about him too, in her own way....

Finally, when it came time for them to leave the room, Julie murmured, “Hey, little detective girl.”

“...Stop calling me that.”

“There’s no harm in it. Say ... when I first saw you, I had a feeling like I had seen you somewhere before.” Julie looked carefully at Victorique’s face. “Now I remember where...”

Next to her, Inspector de Blois’ shoulders suddenly twitched.

“It was at the sanatorium where I was staying. There I met a woman who looked exactly like you. That’s where I remembered your face from. But who was that...?”

Victorique’s green eyes widened for a split second. Then she shook her head. “Who knows?”

“Was it your sister? Or maybe...”

Victorique didn’t answer. Instead, she merely waved goodbye at her.

two

[2]

Once the debriefing was over, they walked out of the room into the hallway. Uniformed policemen and men who looked like detectives were moving busily through the broad corridors. Occasionally, some of them would shoot curious looks at Kazuya and Victorique, seeming to wonder why children were in a place like this.

As they turned the corner, a pair of young men wearing rabbit-skin hunting caps came bounding up to Inspector de Blois.

“Inspector! We received word for you!” The two of them waved their linked hands in the air. “The maid who killed Roxane and escaped has been caught! They’re bringing her here. Oh, look, she’s already here!”

Julie Guile turned to look in the direction they were pointing, and gasped.

A beautiful Arab woman was being dragged down the hall by police officers on either side of her. Her black hair and supple chocolate-brown skin glistened under the lamplight.

When she looked up and saw Julie, a gasp of her own escaped her lips.

They had both grown into adults, and their features had changed beyond recognition. But when they looked into each others’ eyes, they each found that same familiar light shining within.

Unable to believe what she was seeing, Julie whispered, “Ree, is that you...?”

“...Alex?”

Their ten-year reunion was over in seconds, a mere crossing of paths in the hallway.

From behind the Arab maid, Julie called out to her police escort, her voice trembling. “Sir, is that ... the person who killed Roxane?”

“Yes, it is.”

“Oh... So you had your own revenge too, Ree. It took ten years, but you did it....”

Julie put her hand to her throat and clutched the heart-shaped pendant—the pendant she had cherished and kept safe for all these years; Ree’s lucky charm. Julie had picked it up at that staircase, intending to return it to her, but never had the chance to do so.

Julie tore the pendant from her throat. “Ree!” she cried out. Ree looked back.

She threw the pendant into the air.

Ree shook herself free of the policeman’s grasp and reached out to catch it.

“I’m giving it back to you,” said Julie.

Ree tilted her head to one side, unable to understand her words. Then she raised one hand and began a hesitant wave, but was quickly restrained by the policemen. They rounded the corner, and she vanished from sight.

Julie Guile stood there for a moment, simply staring out into the empty hallway.

one

epilogue — the promise

[1]

“...And after the spirits of the past carried out their revenge, the ghost ship *Queen Berry* once again sank to the bottom of the dark sea.”

On a clear morning, behind the main building of St. Marguerite’s School, two children sat on a three-tiered landing overlooking a lush flower garden, speaking to each other in hushed tones.

The scenery was filled with vibrantly blooming flowers, bathed by the sun in intense light. A sweet floral scent assailed their noses. In the background, they heard the faint voices of other students walking along the paths that wound between the gardens. But this landing happened to be nestled out of the way, and there were no other children but the two who sat here, engrossed in their conversation. This was a cozy spot, an empty pocket of air in the bustling campus.

One student was a slight, solemn-faced young Asian boy, and the other was a slim European girl with short blond hair, ruffled by the wind.

The girl—Avril Bradley, a foreign student from England—listened to the boy’s story, her large eyes as wide as saucers.

Kazuya Kujou kept a close eye on her expression, feeling secretly triumphant. *Here we go. Judging by how quiet she’s being, she must be impressed. After all, Avril can only tell ghost stories, but my story is the real thing!* He nodded in satisfaction, savoring the taste of victory. *I win. Hooray!*

Avril suddenly burst out laughing.

“Huh?”

“Oh, my gosh, oh, my gosh, Kujou! Bwa-ha-ha!”

Much to Kazuya’s confusion, Avril began to laugh uproariously, beating her long legs against the ground. Her skirt flapped in the wind, allowing her lithe, slender legs to gleam in the sunlight.

“What’s so funny?”

“I mean, come on! There’s no way any of that’s true!” Avril wiped away tears of laughter with the back of her hand. “Oh, Kujou!”

“But it *is* true!”

“Really, now! You can give up trying to convince me, because there’s no way I’m going to believe any of that.” Avril wagged her finger in front of Kazuya’s face. “No, sir!”

Kazuya’s eyes followed the waving finger back and forth until they crossed. *I wonder why she won’t believe me?* he silently fretted.

“I mean, do you really expect me to believe that this delinquent kid Victorique is actually a girl, and incredibly beautiful, and what’s more, she’s even a brilliant detective?”

“...B-but it’s true! If you want proof, come with me to the top of the library. She really does exist!”

“Ha! I’m not falling for that!” Avril screwed her face up in an annoyed expression and stuck her tongue out at Kazuya. Her smile was adorable and lit up her face. Kazuya fell silent.

“I’d never climb up that huge staircase in a million years anyway. I can’t believe there’s *anyone* in the world willing to do that.”

Victorique had said the same thing to him before.... Kazuya’s shoulders slumped.

Then Avril lowered her voice, as if she was about to tell another one of her ghost stories. “Speaking of which, I know a story about that library. ‘The golden fairy inhabits the top of the labyrinth of stairs’.... Aaaaaaaah!”

“Aaaah!”

“Ha, ha, ha, you fell for it again! You screamed from fright! Kujou’s a scaredy-cat!”

“...I’m not! It’s just that you startled me. I already told you that I’m not a scaredy-cat. Besides, that story is actually true. Well, she may be human and not a fairy, but she’s so different from an ordinary person that you could almost call her one. Anyway, Victorique is—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say. You can stop showing off now.”
Avril snapped her fingers at him.

“...Sorry,” said Kazuya automatically. Once again, he found himself apologizing. It felt like ever since he had come to this country, he spent his time constantly apologizing to girls his age even when he had done nothing wrong. It could just be his imagination, though.

Avril grinned. “For one thing, I don’t know what possessed you to think it was a good idea to come up with that detective story. I already know where you got it from. I read today’s paper too, you know.”

“...Today’s paper?”

“Ta-dah! See, right here. Come on, I know you’ve already read it!”

Kazuya narrowed his eyes at the newspaper page where Avril was triumphantly pointing. Then he suddenly emitted a series of queer moans, causing Avril to jump. Her charmingly ruddy face peeked out at him from around the newspaper.

“...What’s wrong, Kujou?”

“H-h-he did it again.”

“Huh?”

The headline was written as follows:

{Another victory for Inspector de Blois!
Mystery of the ghost ship *Queen Berry* solved!}

Kazuya stood up, the newspaper still clenched in his hands.

Avril stared up at him blankly. “K-Kujou? What’s the matter?”

“...I have a bit of an emergency. See you later, Avril!” Kazuya ran off, leaving a bewildered Avril alone in the garden.

At the same time, a petite woman with shoulder-length brunette hair happened to be walking on the narrow path that led from the garden. Large round glasses magnified eyes that drooped like a puppy’s, set among baby-faced features. It was their homeroom teacher, Miss Cécile.

Spotting Kazuya, she smiled at him. “Oh, Kujou, just in time.”

“Uh, Miss Cécile ... I’m kind of in a hurry....”

“On your way to the library, right?”

“No... Hmm? Yes, that’s right. ...How did you know?”

Cécile chuckled. “There’s only one reason why you’d be in that much of a rush. Here you go. Please give these to Miss Victorique.” She handed Kazuya notes from that day’s classes, as she had done so many times before.

Kazuya accepted them, wondering to himself, *What does she mean by that?* Then he took off running again.

Avril came walking along a few moments later, her gaze following Kazuya running farther away into the distance. “Well. So he’s going to visit Victorique. Huh.”

Cécile smiled and nodded. “Yes. They’re very close.”

“What kind of boy is he, Miss Cécile?”

Cécile blinked in surprise behind her round glasses, then waved her index finger at Avril. “Oh, no, Miss Avril. Miss Victorique is a girl.”

“What?!” Avril screeched. “Well, what do you know. So she really is a girl. And with that name of hers.... What if Kujou’s story was

actually....” She cocked her head in contemplation, then shook it disbelievingly. “Couldn’t be. He had to be making that up,” she murmured.

A warm breeze ushering in the start of spring gently ruffled their hair and the hems of their skirts. If the clear blue sky was any indication, today would be another fine day.

“So, Victorique is a girl. Hmm....” Avril pursed her lips petulantly. “Now I feel kind of jealous.”

Another warm spring breeze blew past, fluttering her skirt and her blond hair. The colorful flowers blooming in the garden shivered as if in response.

two

[2]

“Victori-ique!”

Back at St. Marguerite’s Library, a historical monument renowned throughout Europe for over three hundred years...

Each wall took the form of huge bookcases surrounding a square-shaped hall, beneath the solemn religious frescoes that were painted onto the ceiling far above. A narrow wooden staircase served as the only bridge connecting bookshelf to bookshelf. It was an unusual building constructed like an enormous labyrinth. The great library was said to have been built long ago in the form of a maze to allow a king to rendezvous in secret with his lover....

Kazuya ran up the steps of this labyrinthine staircase, as he did every morning, calling out the name of a certain girl.

“Victori-ique!”

“...You don’t have to shout so loudly.”

At the very top floor, a thin strand of white smoke drifted up to the ceiling. A girl with long, radiant blond hair, draping down to the floor like a turban come undone, sat there by herself, smoking a pipe. Smoke floated up from her pipe, straight to the skylights from which rained down bright sunlight. In this conservatory dense with foliage, the girl sat sprawled on the greenhouse floor, surrounded by books that radiated around her in all directions. She read them listlessly, but with incredible speed. Her body was slumped over the books like a broken doll.

Victorique idly glanced at Kazuya, who stood panting after having run all the way up to the top of the stairs. “Keep up the good work.”

“...Don’t you start again.”

"You're spending your days taxing your circulatory system by running up the stairs, nearly losing consciousness when you look over the railing, sluggishly dragging your thighs back down the staircase, and shouting all the time. This study abroad experience must be very interesting for you."

"Don't say it like none of that has anything to do with you. After all, I'm coming here to see *you*, aren't I?"

"I know that. It was a simple statement of fact."

"I don't think so! You're just trying to make fun of me, aren't you!"

"So what if I was?"

"Ugh... Never mind."

After they had returned to school, Victorique went back to being the aloof, cynical girl he was thoroughly used to dealing with when she was in this library. Kazuya knew that he could never defeat her when it came to verbal sparring, so he chose to meekly back down. Then he presented her with the newspaper he had taken from Avril. "Anyway, take a look at this, Victorique."

Trembling with anger, he awaited her response, but her face showed no change.

Victorique calmly skimmed the article, and nodded. "I see."

"...Everything here comes from your deductions. The information you gave that allowed them to catch the criminal, and your explanation of the case that you gave afterwards in the police station are all here verbatim. Remember how Inspector de Blois was just staring at the birds outside the window during then? He had no idea what was going on; he wasn't even paying attention. You know, I really hate—"

"Mmm." Victorique yawned widely, and offhandedly said, "My brother has always been a vulgar man."

"I know! That inspector is just so vulgar. ...Wait a minute, Victorique, what did you just say?"

“That my brother is a vulgar man?”

“Maybe I misunderstood, but who’s your brother?”

Victorique stared at him, a look of surprise on her face. She removed the pipe from her lips and blew out smoke with her next words. “Gréville.”

“...Oh, your brother.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Hmm. ...Whose brother?”

“Mine.”

“Hmm. ...Whaaaaat!?” shouted Kazuya. He stared hard at Victorique—she was lovely, as perfectly shaped as the most exquisite of dolls, but just a bit too small. And then he visualized Inspector de Blois—handsome, fashionable, but with that ludicrous hairstyle.

...It made no sense.

Kazuya put his head in his hands, utterly confused. Then his gaze happened to wander over to the notes from Miss Cécile that were now scattered across the floor. He delivered these to Victorique every day, but had never actually taken a close look at them before now.

Kazuya knew that Victorique came from a noble household. That was obvious enough just by her attitude and the way she carried herself. And there was also the fact that her name was Victorique de something-or-other....

“Whoa...”

He realized that Victorique’s full name was written on the papers.

Victorique de Blois.

Kazuya raised his vacant eyes and looked at her. She was staring

back at him, her pipe still in her mouth.

“Kujou, are you all right? You have a strange look on your face.”

“I wonder why you and the inspector have the same last name?”

“Probably because we’re siblings?”

“Noooooooo!” cried out Kazuya.

But if he thought about it carefully, other than the fact that they were both nobles, Victorique and the inspector weren’t completely unlike—there was also their mutual devotion to pipe-smoking, along with the glee they both took in blowing smoke in people’s faces. However, physically and intellectually-speaking, they were otherwise absolutely dissimilar.

Kazuya’s face turned serious. “Why?”

“...Don’t blame me,” she said, turning away from him sullenly. But Kazuya kept circling her, constantly asking, “Why? Why?” and Victorique couldn’t get away from him no matter where she turned.

She finally relented. “Kujou, you mean you never knew?”

“No!”

“You’re a strange one.”

“B-b-but Victorique. Did you ever tell me about this before?”

Victorique tilted her head, thinking to herself. Her sleek blond hair undulated to one side, like a shimmering silk curtain.

At last, she wearily yawned. “...No?”

“Then how should I know!”

“Oh, shut up, for goodness’ sake.”

This topic of conversation seemed to put Victorique in a bad mood, and she proceeded to ignore Kazuya, making a show of burying her head in the books that she had been reading earlier without much

apparent interest.

But Kazuya continued to murmur exclamations to himself: “Oh!” “Ugh!” “Unbelievable...” until she could take no more, and lifted her head again.

“Be quiet.”

“Still, though...”

“It’s like this, basically.” Despite her profound reluctance to do so, Victorique began to explain. “He is Gréville de Blois, the heir to the House de Blois and the title of marquis. He may be a vulgar man who likes chasing after women and pretending to be a detective, but he is still the eldest son, my father’s legitimate successor. We are siblings related by blood, but we cannot acknowledge each other in public.”

“...Why not?”

“Well...” Victorique’s face darkened. “That’s because my mother was a mistress. Gréville’s mother was the legal wife, born of noble blood. So that makes us half-siblings.”

“But why does that mean...”

“And my mother was a dangerous figure. She worked as a dancing girl, but she also happened to be insane, and in the chaos of the Great War, she—well, never mind about that part.”

When she started to talk about her mother, for a moment Victorique’s tongue seemed to loosen. But she soon held it again.

Kazuya suddenly thought of the stories that circulated on campus, of which there were quite a few lurid rumors about Victorique: that she was the illegitimate child of a nobleman, and had been feared by the rest of her family, who sent her to this school so she wouldn’t be at home. That her mother was a famous dancer, and a madwoman. That she was an incarnation of the legendary Grey Wolf.

And even the mastermind of the *Queen Berry* incident, Julie Guile,

had said that while in the sanatorium, she saw a beautiful adult woman who looked exactly like Victorique....

Victorique continued, albeit haltingly. "...Anyway, I was born with noble blood, but also with the blood of a dangerous individual. And because I behaved differently from normal children, I spent my childhood confined away from the rest of the de Blois household. And ever since I was sent to this school, I haven't been allowed to leave."

"That's awful...."

"I was only able to go out last week because my brother secured special permission for me, with the condition that he had to accompany me ... although he ended up forgetting about me and leaving in the middle of things. But this means I don't know when I'll be allowed to leave this school again."

"Victorique..." Kazuya was at a loss for words. He remembered when they had set off on their journey last week: how unused to the outside world Victorique seemed to be; how she had leaned out of the train and the carriage, staring at the scenery with such burning curiosity; how entranced she was by the morning sun rising above the ocean.

And when she told him that she didn't dislike beautiful things, and he said they should go see the sun rise again, he remembered how lonely she looked when she smiled in response....

Victorique took a puff from her pipe, and joked, "I'm a captive princess. Doesn't really suit me, does it?"

"...."

Stillness settled upon the greenhouse. Soft beams of springtime sunshine flowed in from the skylights, shining down on the two of them sitting quietly. A gentle breeze lightly rustled the leaves of the dense foliage. The world around them was filled with silence, in complete seclusion from the one below. They continued sitting there wordlessly, with nothing and no one else around to make a sound.

Victorique finally parted her lips. "...And so, the princess is now bored."

"Oh. ...Huh?" Kazuya stiffened, a feeling of uneasiness beginning to spread through him. Looking up, he saw Victorique with the expression she always wore when she was about to throw a tantrum. He was unable to describe exactly how he knew this, but it was a face that he recognized from experience.

"Ahh... So bored."

"I'd better get going to my next class...." Kazuya tried to stand, but Victorique caught onto the hem of his trousers, and he tripped over. "Ouch!"

"I'm bored. Don't you hear me I'm telling you that I'm bored?"

"I'm sorry...?" It wasn't clear to Kazuya whether he should be apologizing at this point, so he ended it with a question mark.

Victorique began to flail her body against the floor. "I'm informing you that the princess is bored! A mystery! I require a mystery!"

"But it's not like there's anything particularly interesting going on right now."

"Then, Kujou, go down to the underworld and bring me an interesting case."

"Not gonna. There's nothing to bring anyway."

"Then you stir up something yourself. Go get mixed up in something dangerous, even if you have to die in the process!"

"Come on, stop being so unreasonable."

Victorique was getting steadily more agitated; clearly, she was in a state of deep tedium. "Oh, it's so boring. I'm bored, so bored I could die. I'll surely die of it. Hey, Kujou! If that happens, then you'll have one less friend, and it's not like you can spare any to begin with."

"...That's going too far. Don't make me get angry with you."

“I’m ... bored....”

She suddenly became quiet.

Huh? Kazuya peered into Victorique’s face, wondering what had happened. Then her small head suddenly fell forward onto him.

“H-hey, Victorique! Are you dead? Did you die of boredom? Wait, is it even possible to die of boredom? Hey!”

Her only response was the steady sound of her breathing.

“...Well, I guess she just fell asleep. Got me worried for a minute there.”

Victorique’s small, golden head leaned on Kazuya’s shoulder, fast asleep. She’d been yawning earlier, Kazuya remembered, so she must have been tired. After the adventure they had on the weekend, anyone would be sleepy the next morning. Although that was apparently something unusual for Victorique....

Kazuya gave up on going to his next class, and continued to lend Victorique his shoulder. Sitting here like this was indeed pretty boring, he thought to himself. He picked up one of the books that she had laying open on the floor, but it was a philosophy book written in difficult Latin, and he ended up tossing it aside before he could finish a single page.

He heard birds singing in the distance.

It was springtime.

A fine season.

As Kazuya sat, hugging his knees, he whispered softly to the slumbering Victorique. “Hey, Victorique. Someday, let’s...”

He blushed slightly. Figuring that she was asleep anyway, he continued. “Let’s go out again, just the two of us. And then we can go watch the sun rise over the sea again.”

Kazuya had assumed Victorique was sleeping, but she suddenly

snapped her green eyes open.

“...It’s a promise.”

And then she silently closed them again.

afterword

Hello, everyone. I'm Kazuki Sakuraba.

Allow me to present to you my new series, "Gosick". I hope you'll enjoy it.

...By the way, right now, which happens to be around mid-November, I'm under the greatest pressure that I've experienced all year. This is due to an e-mail that I received last night from my editor Mr. K-dou, who has always been extremely helpful to me. He just had a minor request, but in a certain sense, there was nothing minor about it.

That request was for me to write a handwritten message to the readers that would be included with an illustration by Hinata Takeda, which would then be distributed to bookstores as a storefront advertisement. Oh, I did feel quite honored to be the subject of such an ad. But then I got to the end of the e-mail:

"And could you write something like 'I hope you'll enjoy Gosick! ~ Kazuki Sakuraba', only phrase it like a dreamy-eyed¹ high school girl. Thanks!"

This put me under an incredible amount of pressure. So I wrote. I went through around twenty different revisions in half a day, just writing, crumpling the paper up into a ball and throwing it away, write, crumple, throw.... almost like a comedy sketch about some author in the olden days. The desperation!

So I ended up spending about five times what it took to write this afterword on that dreamy-eyed message, going back and forth, wondering the whole time, are they really going to use this.... If you happen to find it in a bookstore window, please take a few moments to give it a close look. If there isn't enough dreaminess in it, I sincerely apologize. I will endeavor to improve in the future.

Speaking of high school girls, although I used to be one myself, I don't think I spent much time in a dreamy-eyed state. The letters I wrote were also normal ones. Let me think back a bit. ...All I remember is cutting class so I could go devour books in the library; going home from club activities (I was in the tennis club) with the other girls and stopping by this bakery that we always used to visit; eating popsicles while we chatted about fashion and movies. Now that I think of it, when I read "Azumanga Daioh", I remember nodding to myself, thinking my own high school life was pretty much like that....

Oh, but as for the tennis club, I do have a story about that, when I used to be a member of the Last Bloomer Team of the East [Yonago](#) High School Tennis Club. But it was too interesting of a story, so I decided to save it for the end of this afterword. My afterword is going to be a long one this time. I have to use a gimmick like in a variety show to keep you interested until the very end. So please stick around for awhile, *por favor*.

My dreamy-eyed material already took up two pages, but there's something else I should get to first. Prior to the release of this novel, I also started to write a series of Gosick short stories in the December issue of Dragon Magazine, as part of the Dragon Cup competition. We still don't know the results, or rather it hasn't ended yet. The novel release was also timed to go along with the short stories, in case those who have read the stories and gotten interested in the series also feel like getting their hands on the novel. But even if you haven't been following along in the magazine, you'll still be able to read this novel and enjoy it from the beginning. So I hope you'll like it.

By the way, my editor Mr. K-dou is the one who titled this series "Gosick". Other writers often use the English word "brain-dead" to refer to him in their own afterwords: "Brain-dead Mr. K". "What's 'brain-dead'?" I always wondered, as someone not particularly good at English. Brain death...? But from the way they use it, it can't mean that. They use it to mean that he's an idea man or a

brainstormer, so basically the complete opposite. And he is certainly that kind of person, and I am personally very grateful to him.

And according to this Mr. K-dou, the title “Gosick” has a surface meaning and a hidden meaning. As for the hidden meaning, like I said before, I’m not very good at English, so I had no inkling of this, but it pretty much means, “Ms. Sakuraba is surrounded by weirdos.” Surrounded by weirdos... A lot of people come to mind, but I would probably get into trouble if I were to tell any stories about my writer friends (even if I don’t really mind getting into trouble), so I’ve decided to sacrifice one of my closest girlfriends, and tell a story about a weirdo (I still haven’t written the story about the Bloomer Team).

[Part One]

My friend stole a stone lion.

By stone lion, I’m referring to those stone things placed at either side of shrine entrances. She rolled them away on a dolly, in Shinjuku on a night of a raging typhoon with tornado-force winds. I wonder what was going through her mind at the time.

My friend is petite, with these big, beautiful eyes. She’s a middle school math teacher. To tell you the truth, I used her as the model for Miss Cécile. I’m not just pretty sure, I’m very sure that she’s popular with her students. Popular enough to make kids go dreamy-eyed over her. But she’s also very strange. I’m sure the students don’t know about that part (since adults are cunning creatures, and have weird sides to them that they only show to their closest friends).

She explained to me that a neighborhood shrine was closing for renovations, and she was afraid they would get rid of these “stone lions with cute faces” that she liked very much, so she called her co-worker who owned a car and asked her to become her accomplice in stealing those lions. And she was turned down (like you’d expect). Left with no other option, she borrowed a dolly, and in the

middle of a typhoon, snuck into the shrine, which was a construction zone and covered with a blue vinyl tarp, and exerted superhuman strength to pick up the stone lions and put them on the dolly. When she gazed into the eyes of the lions under the pouring rain, in that moment she knew that they were destined to meet (in her words). And then one of the construction workers came out from behind her and yelled something at her. She thought maybe he was offering to help, but at that point she was already so pumped up by the thought of bringing the stone lions all the way back to her home under her own power, that she just waved him off and made her escape, rolling her handcart down the [Koushuu Highway](#).

The first time she told me about this, when she got to the part about the man calling out, “Let me help you!” ... I had my doubts. I’m sure he said something more like, “Stop, stone lion thief!” When I calmly pointed this out to her while sitting in a local Okinawan restaurant, listening to her tell this story, she just laughed. But the next day, I received a strongly worded e-mail that she had sent from one of her school’s computers. She wouldn’t budge an inch. Teachers sure are stubborn.

That reminds me: this friend recently called me from school on her lunch break. This was while I was spending hours on end doing my impression of a writer in the olden days. She said:

Stone Lion Thief: Hey, do you wanna go see “Kill Bill”?

Kazuki Sakuraba: Ha, you sure picked a weird movie to invite someone to.

Stone Lion Thief: But you’re the only one I can think of who’d come see a weird movie like that. Let’s go this weekend.

Kazuki Sakuraba: ...Actually, I already saw it last weekend.

Stone Lion Thief: Eww, you weirdo!

...And then she hung up the phone. She sounded really indignant. By the way, there’s another part to the stone lion story. After she arrived at home soaking wet, as soon as she rolled the stone lions into her room, the female American Shorthair cat she kept in her room (she named her [KimuTaku](#)) started yowling and running around like she’d gone crazy, and wouldn’t stop. My friend freaked out, thinking that the stone lions must’ve been haunted by

something, and she pushed them out onto her veranda. Once she did that, KimuTaku went back to being her usual KimuTaku self. It's a strange ending, almost like something out of a horror movie. Anyway, I think it's wrong to steal things.

[Part Two]

After that story, whatever I end up writing won't have much impact....

One of the more advanced female students at the [karate](#) dojo I attend burnt her nostrils.

She's very strong and beautiful, an office lady, the wise and mature sort, and was a national champion in the women's lightweight class. By the way, I participated in the same competition at a much, much lower level, and lost. But never mind about that. She is strong and beautiful, but has an unexpected weak point. This is the fact that she is prone to nosebleeds. Her explanation was that she was born with thin mucous membranes in her nose, so she often experienced nosebleeds in class as far back as elementary school. Even after she grew up, whenever she exercised and got her circulation going, her face, wearing a look of concentration, would suddenly explode in a geyser of blood. This also sometimes happened during practices in the dojo, so we would all have to run up to her, holding tissue boxes, towels, and mops, and shouting, "*Sempai!*"

Of course this would also happen during matches, so this one time before a particularly important tournament, she consulted with a local ENT, and he had the inside of her nostrils burnt with chemicals so she wouldn't get a nosebleed. The day of the tournament, she confidently declared to us, her assistants, "I'll be fine today. I burnt my nostrils!"

According to her ENT, she would have fewer nosebleeds for the next month. The rest of us looked at each other, and skeptically replied, "Got it."

And then the match was on. She won by [ippon](#) and advanced to the next round, just like we knew she would. She's so strong! So cool! We forgot our initial misgivings and cheered for her until our voices

went hoarse. Then the semifinals began, and there was one minute left. It was a close match, and the audience was going wild. And then...

Splurt!

...Blood came gushing out, just like I thought would happen. They halted the match, and next thing we heard was the announcer's voice crackling over the PA system: "We will resume proceedings as soon as the participant's nose stops bleeding."

We hung our heads. I heard someone mutter dejectedly, "But she even burned it and everything," but that voice was soon drowned out by all the commotion in the hall....

[Part Three]

In the minds of the readers, a beautiful karate master who sprays blood profusely from her nose may sound like a vision from hell, but I will nevertheless continue onto the next story. This one is also about a good-looking friend, but she also has somewhat of a permanent sourpuss, and I've heard people say that she would be more popular if only she weren't so intimidating. She is a nurse, and as long as she keeps her mouth shut, she's an angel in white. But once she opens it, she can be merciless (especially to boys).

One morning, while washing her face, the pinky finger of her right hand slipped inside her nostril and jabbed the back of her nose, and she ended up with such a violent nosebleed that she was late reporting for work at the hospital.

...I'm sorry; that's all I have. It's just that if I start writing about nosebleeds, then I'm immediately reminded of her.

[Part Four]

This is another story about that sour-faced angel. I think she might not be too good at getting other people's sense of humor, and it can be hard to kid around with her. But although you might not expect it of her, she has a tendency to do things that make her the butt of jokes. One of those things happens to be her underwear.

She wears a golden bra.

This summer, the four of us girls took a trip to Phuket, the isle of eternal summer. The beach! Fruits! Muay Thai! We stayed at a pretty fancy hotel where there were a lot of couples on their honeymoon. We spent five nights there, and since it was just us women, some of us would use the bathroom to wash and dry our underwear.

One morning, I woke up and went to the bathroom, and inside was a glittering golden bra that had been hung to dry.

I looked away.

Then looked back again.

The bra was still there. It was no illusion; it truly existed right before my eyes.

This was very puzzling. I silently washed my face, brushed my teeth, and came back out, and found two other ladies who had gotten up earlier, sitting in their beds with stony looks on their faces. We kept sneaking peeks at each other, before quickly looking away ... until finally one brave person decided to open her mouth.

Stone Lion Thief: It's not mine.

Kazuki Sakuraba: ...It isn't mine either.

Another Person: Not me!

And then the three of us slowly turned to look at the last remaining person... the Sour-faced Angel, who was still sleeping peacefully in her bed. She was so scary when she was awake, but when she was asleep like this, she wasn't saying anything at all, and she truly looked like an angel.

While she slept, we settled on a nickname for her by unanimous vote: "The Golden Bra". The Stone Lion Thief rolled around in glee. When The Golden Bra finally woke up, she was furious with us, and angrily protested, "Why are you calling me that?! Stop it! Call me by my real name!" But she was outnumbered and overruled.

But still...

I never would've expected that a cool beauty like her, who never cracked so much as a smile, would wear underwear that looked like something you'd find on a Las Vegas showgirl. I wish I hadn't forgotten to ask her where she bought it. Maybe at [Don Quijote](#)...?

If I had to force this story into having a moral, then it's that there are certain things you can only find out about people when they strip down to their underwear. Yeah, I was pretty shocked.

...Why was I telling all these stories again? Oh, right, because this afterword has more pages than usual. But I made it through. Let's hope my friends don't read this book.

Now it's time to write the story of the Last Bloomer Team of the East Yonago High School Tennis Club. Well, actually, it isn't that interesting of a story. The tennis club I joined was straightforwardly divided into two divisions: tennis, which was more hardcore, and [soft tennis](#), which was more informal. The most trying aspect of the stricter tennis division that I joined was their over ten-year-long "tradition" that new members be required to wear [bloomers](#) for one year.

And my image of outfits in the tennis club had been so much cuter!

The second and third year students wore these white fluffy miniskirts called skorts, under which they had lacy shorts. But the first-years were only allowed to wear a T-shirt and bloomers. The T-shirts were so long that it wouldn't have made a difference if one day we forgot to wear trousers underneath. And to make matters worse, whenever we were seen around school, the [gakuran](#)-clad cheering section would jeer, "Team Bloomers! It's Team Bloomers! Go get 'em!" We would hit them with our tennis rackets, but they would just laugh. I suppose it was very amusing for them.

The worst part of all was that we had to leave the school grounds dressed like that and go running around in the street, shouting "East High! Fight, fight!" at the top of our lungs. Of course, that meant the rest of the neighborhood was familiar with the existence of Team Bloomers, too. We must have looked pretty stupid.

Then at long last, a year had passed, and just when I thought I would finally get to wear skorts! fluffy lacy skorts! the final tragedy occurred.

The next member who became club president suddenly declared, “I’ve had enough of these meaningless traditions. Starting this year, everyone can wear skorts.” I guess you could say she was a reformer. Wh-what a sudden development! What was the point of that whole year we had spent skort-less, then...?

So as of that year, the Bloomer Team was no more, and we ended up going shopping with the first years to buy skorts, with the heavy cross of the “Last Bloomer Team” borne on our backs (I believe there were seven of us in all).... It somehow sounds so plain compared to the other stories.

Oh, this afterword is so long! If you have read this far, I am truly grateful.

Now it’s about time that I wrap this up.

First of all, thank you once again to my editor Mr. K-dou, and to all of those who have been of such enormous help to me. Thank you so much to the illustrator Hinata Takeda for creating such adorable, luminous drawings of a heroine so different from her cheerful, smiling [Yaeka](#). Even when Victorique is sulking, I just want to poke her chubby cheeks. I love it! Thank you.

And thank you to all of those who are reading this book. If you’ve had a good time reading it, that alone makes me very happy. See you again next time!

Kazuki Sakuraba

Beans Bunko Edition Afterword

Dear Beans Bunko readers: pleased to meet you! (And to those who have already been reading, it’s truly, truly good to see you after

such a long time. Thank you very much for remembering this series and picking up this edition.)

I'm Kazuki Sakuraba. *takes a bow*

The Gosick series started out at the end of 2003 on another imprint belonging to the Kadokawa Group, Fujimi Mystery Bunko. I was originally one of six unknown writers who were each asked to contribute a short story for a competition at a certain monthly magazine, and the readers would vote to select which one would get serialized. But the votes for my story sadly fell short, and I lost. (I have memories of someone telling me that I came in second or third, and of me rolling around on the floor and wailing....) However, thanks to the support of the readers (y-you're all lifesavers. Thank you for your help at just the right time), it ended up getting serialized in a quarterly magazine instead.

The series made it to nine volumes, and then the label and the magazine both folded. In September 2009 they were republished under the Kadokawa Bunko imprint with new covers. When they informed me about the reason for the new covers, they said that since Kadokawa Bunko had readers from a wide range of age groups, they thought it best to remove the illustrations that were geared more toward young people. As the author, on one hand I understood the decision, but on the other hand, I felt that those wonderful illustrations were an important part of the series. So ever since the first installment (that time when I lost that competition... ugh, I feel like rolling around on the floor again....), it feels like I've been walking together with Hinata Takeda's depictions of Victorique. When I was wishing that there could be some way to bring back the illustrated version, a representative from Beans Bunko asked if there was anything they could do. And that's how this edition ended up before your eyes.

So...

If you find these books to your liking, that would make me very happy. *heart thumping*

The story begins when a mysterious girl with golden hair meets a boy from an island country in the Far East who came to study in the tiny European nation of Sauvure. The books that end in “S” are short story collections.

In chronological order:

GosickS I—The Reaper Who Comes in Spring

Gosick I

Gosick II—The Crime Without a Name

Gosick III—Under the Blue Rose

Gosick IV—Speaker for a Fool

GosickS II—A Train Away from Summer

Gosick V—Beelzebub’s Skull

Gosick VI—The Night of the Masquerade

GosickS III—Memories of Autumn Flowers

Gosick VII—The Rose-Colored Life

And to add another medium to the mix, there will be an anime airing on TV Tokyo starting January 2011. DVD and Blu-Ray preorders are already in progress. In addition, the manga version by [Sakuya Amano](#) (Fujimi Shobo) is currently on its sixth volume, and [Takeshi Moriki](#)’s series of slice-of-life yonkoma and short stories, “[Gosick W](#)“, is being carried by Monthly Comp Ace, accompanied by a supplemental series of yonkoma called “Miss Victorique” by [Mako Aboshi](#). If you’re interested, then I hope you’ll have fun trying out all of the above.

I also have other works starring female protagonists in modern-day Japan: “Red X Pink”, “Presumed: Girl”, “A Lollypop or a Bullet”, “Rowan Girl and the Seven Pitiful Adults”, which are being released as part of Kadokawa Bunko’s “Sakuraba Kazuki Collection” (kind of like a private label; you can spot them by their cute plaid covers!).

And then, and then! Gosick’s illustrator Hinata Takeda has some manga series of her own: “Yaeka’s Veterinary Charts”, “[Crossroads in a Foreign Labyrinth](#)”, and “[Fox and Atori](#)”. When my editor and I first laid eyes on her gorgeous artwork, we were extremely impressed, and immediately wanted her to draw the illustrations for Gosick.

Let me take a deep breath here. This series has been running for a long time, so there are a lot more announcements than I had expected. But I'm done now! Thank you for reading all the way to the end.

Gosick has been able to weather a dizzying array of changing fads in the industry and survive over a long period of time, and there are a lot of people who have helped me make it to this point. I especially want to thank my editor at Fujimi Mystery Bunko, Hirotake Kudou², for working with me as my producer and helping get the series off the ground; Akiko Kaneko for utilizing her many talents in handling the changeover to the new covers at Kadokawa Bunko and with the anime adaptation project; and also Maho Sakauchi² (who ate 2.7 kg of red bean paste when she was in high school), who will be assisting me from now on at Beans Bunko. And there are so, so many others who have saved me over the years, and helped me get to where I am today.

But above all, I want to thank the readers! Whether you are reading my books for the first time, or have been reading from the beginning, I am truly thankful!

By simply reading and enjoying this series, the author and the characters both feel very honored.

That's all for now. I hope to see you again!

Kazuki Sakuraba

February 2011

(After the Fujimi Mystery Bunko edition was published in December 2003, it was republished in September 2009 by Kadokawa Bunko. Because the afterword is reprinted from the Fujimi Mystery Bunko edition, all of the information regarding dates of upcoming publications and magazine appearances are from the perspective of the original edition published in 2003.)

¹The word her editor used was “hanyaan” à la Sakura Kinomoto.

²I wasn't able to locate official pronunciations of these individuals' names, so this is just my guess based on common readings of those

characters.